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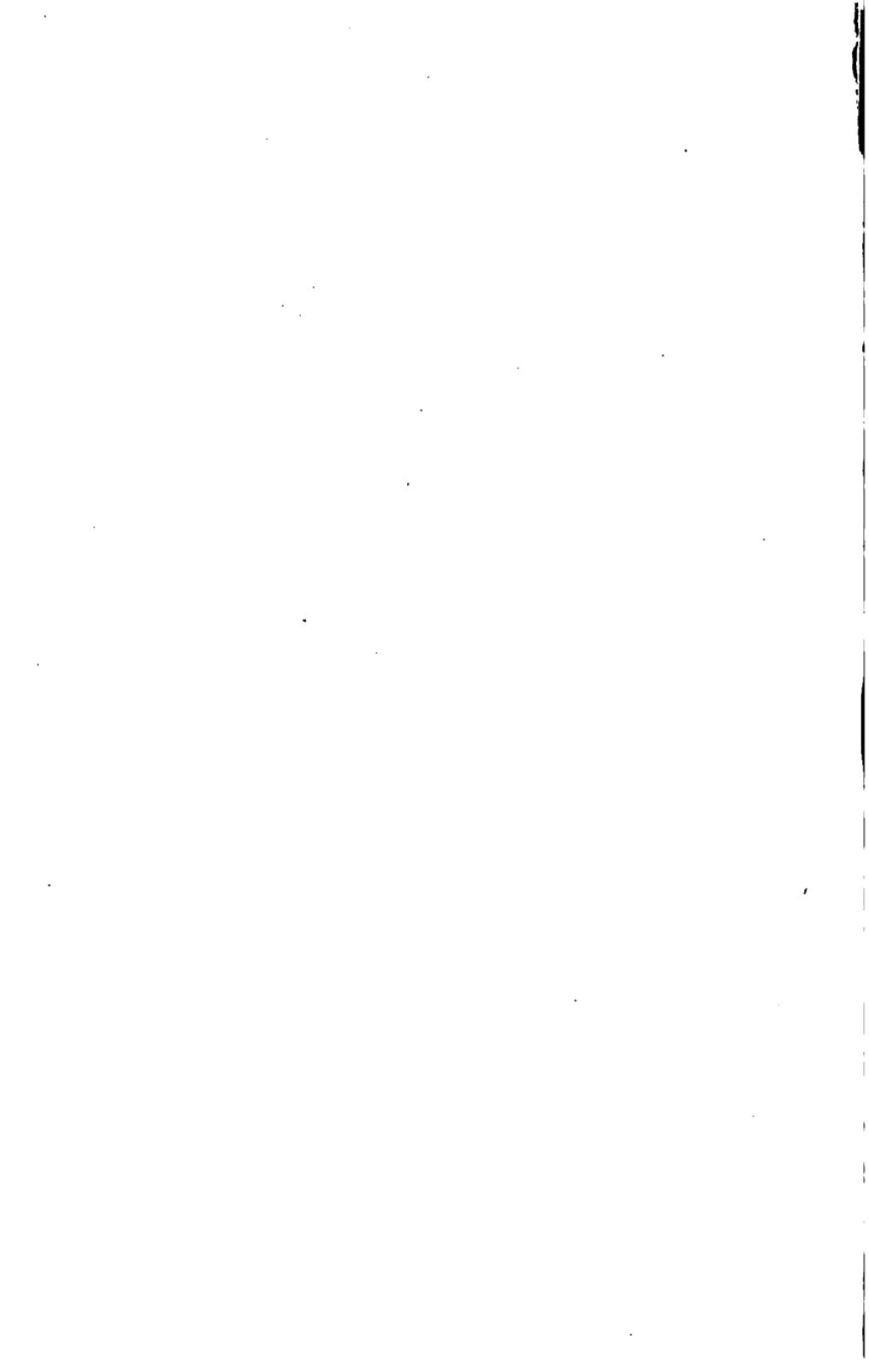
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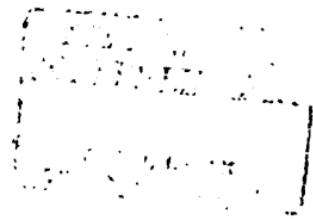
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1874









The competitors advanced one by one

A BOYAR OF THE TERRIBLE

A ROMANCE OF THE COURT OF IVAN THE CRUEL
FIRST TSAR OF RUSSIA—

BY

FRED. WHISHAW

AUTHOR OF 'OUT OF DOORS IN TSARLAND' 'BORIS THE BEAR-HUNTER'
'A LOST ARMY' 'THE ROMANCE OF THE WOODS' ETC.

ILLUSTRATED BY H. G. MASSEY

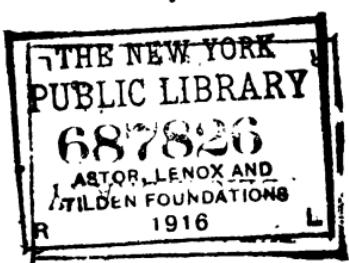
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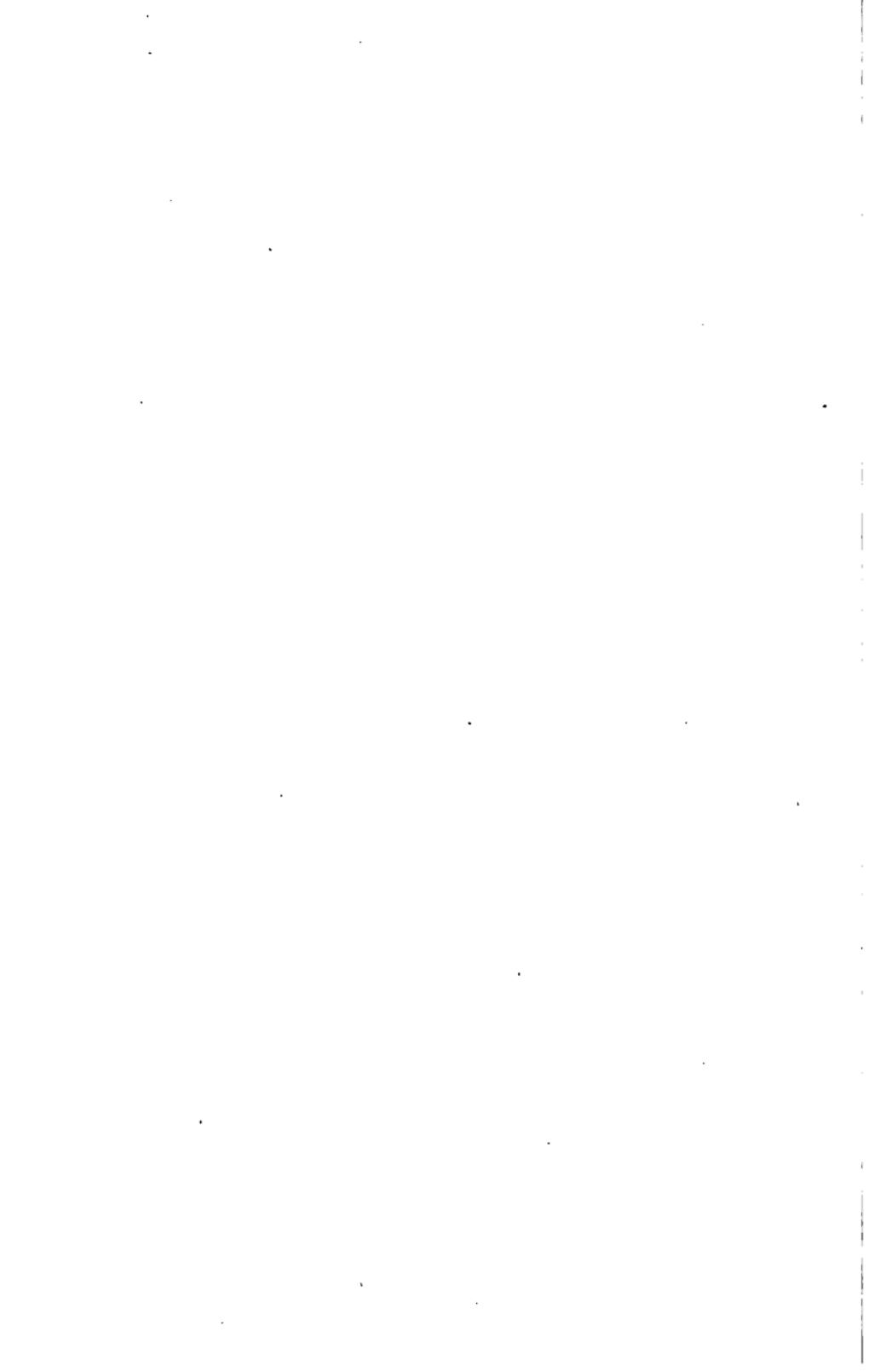
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A BOYAR OF THE TERRIBLE

CHAPTER I

AN IMPERIAL FOOTPAD

I, LIKE David, have been young, though now I am old ; and before I go down to the grave I have a mind to set down some of my recollections of the curious relations that subsisted between myself and my master Ivan, the first Russian Cæsar, and I suppose the greatest Russian who has up to this time tasted God's air and walked this earth of His.

My dear master and friend has gone to the grave before me ; but I thank the Almighty that before it pleased Him to take my sovereign to Himself, it seemed good to Him to reconcile us two, one to the other ; for, alas ! we had been, largely through my own action, as I freely acknowledge and admit, estranged for many years, and though I have many and many a time endeavoured to reinstate myself in my master's favour, yet until the last few years of his eventful life I never fully did so. Doubtless, I did not deserve his friendship. I repeat

again and again that mine was the fault, for I offended against the Anointed of the Lord, and set my youthful will against that of my beloved friend and sovereign ; and for this sin my severe but just master could never forgive me in my manhood, nor, indeed, till advancing age had softened both our hearts, and drawn together the spirits which had been so familiar in youth.

My master has been called cruel. It is said that he will be known to all time as *Ivan Grosnui*: the cruel, the terrible. Knowing him as I knew him I must say this : that if ever one human body contained two distinct personalities ; or rather, if ever the good and the evil which co-exist in the person of every human being on this earth, were so divided in the individuality of one man that they gave to that man the appearance of being now wise and good as a god, and now cruel and wanton as a devil, the Tsar Ivan Vassilievitch was he. My master was distinctly two men in one. Who shall blame him ; who shall judge him ? Consider his boyhood, of which I shall presently give a picture—for was not I one of his chosen companions and playmates ?—fatherless from the age of three ; motherless from the age of eight years ; the deliberately neglected victim of those base men—Shuisky and Belsky and their following, the self-appointed Regents of the Empire : left by them, of their fiendish and interested cunning, to indulge his unbridled tempers and passions to the top of his bent, without

warning or remonstrance, without advice or saving counsel, or even the bare classification of matters into the Right and the Wrong : what chance, I say, had this lad of growing up into a merciful and wise and clement prince, such as nature perhaps intended him to be ? I say that my dear master did not enjoy such opportunity, in his boyhood, of learning to distinguish vice from virtue, as is enjoyed at his ignorant mother's knee by the lowest serf-boy in the land. Shuisky was to blame, and Shuisky only. But before I enter upon a description of my youthful days and of my relations with my beloved young Tsar, let me say a word about myself, and explain who I am and why I am writing this record.

Well, I am Alexander Stroganof, a count and boyarin of the holy Russian Empire. My English friends, in after years, used to call me 'strong enough,' which words in the English language approach somewhat in sound to that of my name 'Stroganof,' and signify, in their tongue, 'possessing sufficient strength,' which, the English were wont to declare laughingly, was an appropriate title for me—and in truth, I think it was ; for I am, or was, strong enough to be too strong for most of my fellow-creatures with whom I have come at various times in contact.

As for my reason for setting down this record, it is enough to say that I can write without effort, being an educated man and travelled ; and that I am old and somewhat worn and depressed ; and that it com

forts me to occupy myself with my pen ; and, furthermore, that I have much to tell, and wish to tell it before I go down to the grave.

My home is at Perm, beneath the Urals, near the great Kama river, and it was with my uncle, Simeón Stroganof, the renowned merchant, that I first came, as a boy, to Moscow : I to see the world, my older kinsman to see the guardians of the Tsar as to the widening of our territory on the Kama, and other matters of business.

My kinsman left me very much to myself in the great capital city, and I—knowing no one, and ignorant of and wondering at everything I saw—was allowed to wander about the streets at will ; being at this time about fourteen years of age and remarkably strong and tall for a boy of so few summers.

My first meeting with my master the Tsar was in this wise. I was standing close to the bank of the small river, the Moskva, reflecting how mean and small, in comparison with our own beautiful Kama, was this streamlet which runs through the streets of the capital city, when I was suddenly startled by a loud yell from behind the wall of an adjacent house, and at the same instant received a very violent blow on the back, from a stick or stone, which precipitated me into mid-stream.

Being a good swimmer I thought nothing of the incident as a disaster ; as an insult, however, my pride revolted immediately against it, and as I swam

back to shore I looked out eagerly for someone upon whom to vent my wrath and desire for vengeance. I did not long remain in doubt as to the identity of my assailants, for at that moment a band of boys of all ages, from twelve to about seventeen, came shouting and waving sticks from behind the wall, headed by one of about my own age, or perhaps a trifle older : a striking-looking lad, slim and elegant in figure, and with the eyes and nose of a bird of prey. He wore the Russian shirt and trowsers, without kaftan ; but his shirt was richly worked in blue and red, and the belt about his waist was of silver, chased and filigreed, and his cap was adorned with valuable jewels. This lad held up his hand, and the rest were silent in an instant, all but one who had not noticed the sign, and continued to shout and boo at me as I swam about looking for a place to land.

‘Be silent, Petka, you dog !’ shrieked the young leader of this rowdy band—‘here, Gregory, Timothy, in with him ; no disobedience here !’

‘Oh, don’t throw me in,’ howled Petka, blubbering ; ‘I can’t swim a stroke—I shall be drowned !’

‘Did you swear obedience with the rest ?’ said the be-jewelled lad.

‘Yes,’ blubbered the other, ‘but——’

‘In with him, then,’ shouted the leader, stamping ; and instantly two or three of the others caught poor Petka by shoulders and heels, and swung him far out into the stream.

I postponed my landing to see what would come of his statement that he could not swim, and it was fortunate for Petka that I did so ; for after splashing and floundering for a minute or two, struggling and blubbering, while of those on shore some laughed and some looked grave, down he went.

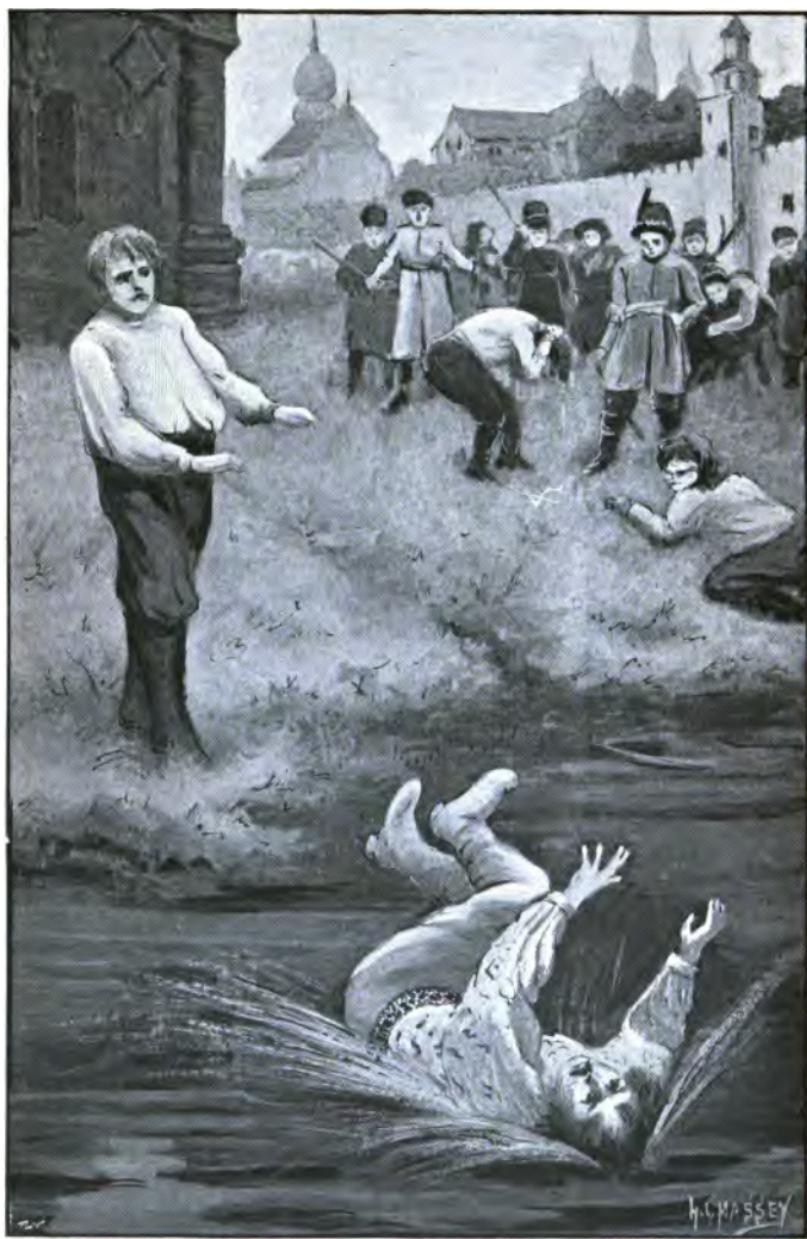
Down went I also, after him, and fished him up, and together we struggled to the shore. Here the young captain interfered again.

'That's enough for Petka,' he cried, 'he won't disobey his general again—let him up ; but take that new fellow and pitch him back for interfering where he was not asked ! '

Two of the boys, those whom he had addressed as Timoféy, or Timothy, and Gregory, came down to the bank at this, and each laid hold of a shoulder of mine to pull me out. But I caught each by a leg, and, having a good foothold, easily pulled them down into the water, where I put both their heads under, and then left them to scramble out as best they could, while I set them an example by getting ashore as quickly as I might before others should be told off to prevent me.

The boy whom I have described as the leader of this precious crew, as well as many of his companions, was at this time in fits of laughter over Timothy and Gregory's discomfiture ; but I put a sudden end to his mirth by bounding straight up to him as he stood and pointed and laughed, and seizing him in my





The next instant he plunged in with a grand splash

arms—‘Now,’ I said, ‘my friend, it is your turn to swim and ours to laugh !’

The boy stamped his foot at me and would have spoken, but his surprise or his passion was too great. Foam came from between his lips, but no articulate words. I cared nothing for the stamping of his foot, nor yet for the foaming of his mouth. The rest shouted at me, but I did not listen. I took the boy up by the breast of his shirt in one hand, holding his kicking legs together at the knees with the other, and swung him once, twice, thrice—he found his voice at the second swing—‘Let me go,’ he shrieked, ‘I am Ivan !’

‘I don’t care who you are,’ I said, ‘you impudent young bully, you’ll be a wet Ivan directly !’

‘But I can’t swim,’ he blubbered, as he flew through the air, and the next instant he plunged with a grand splash into the Moskva, half-way across, and struggled and floundered for all the world as Petka had.

Of course I was not going to allow him to drown ; but he was quite half-drowned by the time I went to his assistance ; and when I placed him on the bank, he lay there panting and spitting water from his mouth for some minutes before he could find breath to speak. When he was able to raise his head and look around, he glared at me with a very wicked look ; his eyes—as sharp as a hawk’s—seemed to glow like two little live coals. He foamed and fumed and gnashed his teeth at me, and again at his

companions before he spoke; they all appeared frightened or abashed, and said nothing; as for me, I could not forbear to laugh, for in truth it appeared to me a foolish and ridiculous thing that this boy, far smaller than many of his comrades, should have so successfully dominated the rest that they were appalled because of his absurd anger. At last he spoke.

‘I told you I was Ivan,’ he said.

‘And I told you you would be a wet Ivan before long,’ I rejoined; ‘if you feel a desire to have a little more of the Moskva inside you, you will continue to make faces at me, for that is the straight way into the river.’

At this the boy commenced to writhe and shriek with passion. ‘Gregory, Timothy, Stepán, kill him; tell him who I am and kill him instantly, do you hear me?’ he blustered, jumping to his feet and stamping about in rage. ‘Tie stones to his feet and pitch him into the water—knock him on the head with your sticks.’ Then I thought I had to deal with a godsman, as we call the unfortunate demented, and pitied him.

‘Is he a godsman?’ I asked of the crowd of lads around.

‘He is the Grand Duke of Russia, you fool,’ said one of them; ‘and you will pay for what you have done to-day.’

‘*This* the Grand Duke of Russia?’ I said,

laughing; ‘are you *all* mad? He is a boyar by his dress, certainly, but not by his manners; as for all of you, you——’

‘I am Ivan, I say,’ cried the leader, recommending his shrieks and stamping; ‘Timothy, seize him you, or Vainka if he and Gregory are afraid—seize him and tie weights to him and drown him—and may the devil have him—I hate him—kill him!’

But no one moved, though several glowered at me; they did not like the look of me and my stick—one I had taken up from the ground, where somebody, Ivan himself, I think, had laid it. The stick was furnished with an iron spike at the end, and was a formidable weapon.

‘By St. Cyril and St. Methodius you shall all suffer for this—every one of you!’ cried Ivan, looking around with an expression that a demon might have envied. ‘Will not one of you obey?’

‘Let him put down the stick, and I will try him,’ said a big boy—Vainka by name. I threw down the weapon, and we wrestled. When we were close to the bank of the river I tripped Vainka, and he splashed head first into the water.

To my surprise I found that Ivan had recovered from his fit of passion, and was laughing at Vainka’s discomfiture. I looked at him fixedly. Could this really be young Ivan Vasilitch, the Grand Duke of Muscovy—my sovereign—or was the whole thing a play, acted by a rowdy party of boys for their own

diversion ? His countenance, now that the passion had disappeared from it, was refined and noble ; his eyes were hawk-like still, but the evil glow had departed from them ; his body had a natural aristocratic pose ; I gazed at him and felt unaccountably attracted. Grand Duke, or mere boyar, this lad was a remarkable personality. I had reached this point in my reflections when he turned his head and caught me looking at him. He stamped his foot and frowned ; but whether it was that he discerned more respect and admiration in my expression, or whether my victory over Vainka had pleased him, his eyes did not glow with passion as before. We stared in one another's faces for a moment. During that moment I came to the conclusion—I scarcely knew why, though I now understand that the majesty in that face was quite unmistakable when not concealed by the contortions of passion—that this must certainly be the youthful Head of the realm : the young Grand Duke Ivan, and that I had gone within sight of drowning the Lord's Anointed. At this thought (for we Stroganofs, though independent, are the most loyal of the subjects of the Tsar) I was conscious of a great horror, and hid my face in my hands and dropped on my knees. ‘What have I done—what have I done ?’ I murmured. ‘If you are indeed Ivan Vasilitch, the Grand Duke, what have I done in throwing you into the river ?’

‘ You have certainly committed a great sin,’ said Ivan, ‘ but since you pulled me out again you have

partially atoned for it; you shall fully atone by instantly joining my band and obeying my orders. Is it agreed ?'

' So long as your way is God's way, I agree,' I said.

The boy looked grave for a moment, then he smiled. ' That is a good answer,' he said; ' you please me. Now take Timothy and Gregory and throw them into the water, and afterwards every one of the others excepting Vainka Koltso, who alone obeyed orders, though it were to his own disadvantage. Now, sir—take Gregory first—resist, Gregory—don't be a sheep.'

My orders astonished me mightily.

' But what about those who cannot swim ? ' I said, hesitating.

' Oh, Lord have mercy upon us, save them if you think them worth it ! ' said Ivan; ' I don't ! '

Then there arose such a wailing and blubbering as I never thought to hear on this earth; yet not one of those boys dared run away and thus avoid the punishment in store for him. There were thirteen in all, counting the prince and Vainka Koltso, and eleven of these had to be ducked. Some of them resisted violently, and four times I was myself tripped and ducked by my assailants. But in the end each of the eleven had his ducking, and the sentence was duly executed; but since I had been obliged to wrestle many times, and had been worsted at least four times

(though in the end I overthrew each of my conquerors), and was besides obliged to plunge in to save half a dozen of my victims, I was fairly exhausted when the business was done and my duty performed, and had scarcely strength to crawl out after my last immersion, or breath to thank my new friend and master when he called encouragingly to me as I scrambled ashore, and said I had done well, and he should like me.

‘Now you can all go to your homes, poor creatures that you are !’ he added, frowning around at the rest ; ‘why are you not all like him ? I should make something of my Russia by-and-by, if you were ! The company is dissolved till to-morrow—march ! Stay here with me, you !’ he added, laying his hand upon my arm.

The dripping band of boys dispersed with shouts and rejoicings, leaving me alone with my new friend. A moment after there was not one in sight, and only the distant sound of their happiness could be heard. It was like the breaking up of a school. This lad was evidently a hard taskmaster, and his playmates took more pleasure in the dispersion of the band than in the assembling of the same.

CHAPTER II

CAMPAIGNING

‘I BELIEVE I shall like you; I think we may be friends,’ said my companion when the rest had gone; ‘you are strong and bold, and may be of great use to me in my campaigning. But who are you; what is your name?’

I wondered at the prince’s manner of expressing himself. What did he mean by campaigning! However, I told him my name.

‘Oh!’ he said, ‘then you have come up from Perm with the man who has been bargaining with Shuisky these days?’ I concurred. ‘Then you may tell your relative,’ he continued, ‘to be careful in his dealings with that thief and liar, for he will swindle him and deceive him as he has swindled every other boyar in the empire who has dealings with him. I heard him telling someone, Belsky or one of the Glinskys I think, that he found these Stroganofs were as rich as Croesus, and he was going to milk them like so many cows.’

I was greatly surprised to hear this, for the Regent had been all that was courteous and kind towards my

uncle. But I afterwards learned that this Shuisky was of all men the most crafty and deceitful.

But I only said that I would warn my relative as the prince suggested ; and then I asked my companion why he had had me attacked and pitched into the water. What had I done to deserve this treatment at his hands ?

‘ Done ! ’ he said, astonished. ‘ Why, nothing of course. What an odd question. I had never seen you before, so that you could have done nothing to offend me ! ’

‘ Then why attack an innocent lad ? ’ I repeated. ‘ How could you tell that I should not have been drowned ? I might not have been able to swim ! ’

‘ Oh well,’ said Ivan, laughing, ‘ you would not have been the first. The other day we did drown a boy ; he was not of the boyar class, like yourself, and nothing was said ; he went down without a struggle, and never came up again. If his folks had come down to the river and made any fuss about it we should have beaten them. They are all very harmless, as soon as they are told who I am.’

I gazed at the Grand Duke in horror. ‘ And why do you do this kind of thing ? ’ I asked him.

‘ What else is there to do ? ’ he said, quite surprised. ‘ The Grand Duke may surely amuse himself as he pleases, without consulting his subjects. However, we do not often take life—human life, I mean ; we drown all the stray dogs and other animals we can

catch—drown them, or get our fun out of them some other way. My campaigners and I have better fun with our captives than drowning them, as a rule. You shall come and see for yourself now that you are enrolled.'

'But I am only conditionally enrolled,' I said. 'I undertook to be of your party so long only as your ways are God's ways.'

'But the Grand Duke is God in Russia,' said Ivan. 'Shuisky says so; nothing that I do can possibly be wrong, he says.'

'And what is his opinion of your drowning your subjects, and doing I know not what besides with them?' I asked, feeling that I was in a sort of dream.

'Oh, we only frighten them and beat them, if they resist, and take their money,' said the prince; 'I always tell Shuisky of our adventures, because it puts him in good humour; he laughs and says that I am the kind of king that Russia wants, one who is not afraid of his people or of anything else. Ask him, if you like, what he thinks of me. Sometimes I fancy he is anxious that I should come to harm during our marauding expeditions, for though he professes to be my most faithful regent and friend, yet if I were to die I know not who would step into my place if it were not Shuisky. Therefore tell him, as an entertaining anecdote, of how you threw me into the stream and were obliged to fish me out again; you will see by his

face whether the story really alarms him on my account, or whether he is only sorry that your pitching me in was followed by your fishing me out.'

I mentally resolved that I would do exactly as this cunning youth suggested.

'But why,' I said, 'must you rob and beat your people? Is there no better way of amusing yourself than this?'

'As for their money,' he replied, 'I need it. I depend upon it for everything I buy. Shuisky gives me none. I should not even have food enough, but for what I purchase for myself.'

All this was perfectly true, as I discovered afterwards. The miscreant Shuisky not only made light of the prince's misconduct, but actually deprived him of the necessaries of life in order to compel him to act the common highwayman and street robber, in company with his rascally young confederates, those whom I had had the pleasure of ducking; praising and treating as—at the worst—amiable youthful eccentricity, conduct which an honest guardian would instantly have execrated and forbidden. But instead of allowing my poor young master to see such conduct as his own in its proper light: as disgraceful and unworthy in the meanest of his subjects, and contemptible and abominable in the highest degree when indulged in by one occupying his position, this villainous regent or minister for his own ends obscured the truth, and allowed the prince to go from wickedness to wickedness, until at

length, as I hinted before, he actually was unable to distinguish right from wrong, and was convinced that in the successful execution of his miserable robberies and street bullyings he was evincing the highest and princeliest qualities, and showing, for all men to see, how wise and brave a ruler he should be when old enough to take upon himself the reins of government.

Out of curiosity, and without binding myself to take part in any enterprise of which I disapproved, I joined the band of the Grand Duke's confederates on the following day, and saw with my own eyes what manner of entertainment was this which the young prince, my master, had invented and organised for his own recreation, and which Shuisky, his responsible guardian, approved as a fitting occupation for the titular head of this great Empire of Muscovy.

We stationed ourselves, I remember, behind a paling at the outskirts of the city, not far from the spot at which I had myself been surprised and attacked on the previous day; and there we lay in ambush awaiting whatever prey fortune should send into our net.

Presently a peasant came driving along the dusty road in his cart. With him were two women wearing red handkerchiefs over their heads and singing merrily, as our Russian peasant women do. As they passed us, the horse was startled and seized, and the serf pulled out of the cart. The women stopped their singing to cry aloud in their terror; the man blub-

bered for mercy. His pockets were searched and those of the women also ; the cart was full of butter-tubs, and the three vowed and protested that they were without money. A few coppers were found, and these were taken, after which the peasant was well beaten and released. I had thought the women would be spared, but this was not the case, and they were beaten also.

I protested against this useless cruelty, but Ivan laughed and said his ‘men’ must be amused. He added that if I objected to the action of those who had beaten the women I might settle with them for myself, and this I was glad to do, for it relieved my feelings ; and with the same birch sticks that had belaboured the peasant women I soon gave the two offenders as much as I thought the occasion demanded, they making little or no resistance but much noise, and the young Grand Duke applauding and laughing, mightily pleased and amused.

After this there were richer persons robbed, and one way and another a considerable sum of money was acquired by these foul means. As a rule, if any victim showed much resistance he was safe ; for the band, being mere youths and boys, possessed little real fighting capacity, and relied more upon terrifying their victims than upon reducing them by force. I was glad whenever one escaped us by standing up to his assailants, and on one occasion—greatly to his surprise and to the disgust of our own party—I took

the side of a gallantly resisting young boyar, who was set upon unawares by the entire force, but placed his back to the wall and defied them.

'I know you and your ways, you cowards,' he said; 'that boy there with the silver belt is Ivan, the Grand Duke; he must be mad to allow the scum of the city to attack in his name the respectable citizens, and even his own boyars like myself; come on, I defy you, prince and all!'

I saw the prince at this suddenly change. His countenance grew livid and devilish, just as it had been yesterday, and his eyes reddened with glowing fire. He let fly his iron-tipped stick at the defiant boyar's head, but the young man deftly avoided it, and bowed gravely to the prince.

'Done like a Tsar,' he said, 'a truly princely action. Now then, you others, scum of Moscow, attack!'

'Not I, for one!' I said, laughing; 'I do not belong—I am on your side in this matter, Adashef!'

'You know me?' he said, astonished. 'What, Sasha Stroganof—in this company—oh, Sasha!' he added, seeing and recognising me.

'It is an accident,' I said, taking my stand at his side; 'this will prove it, and I flourished my stick and joined him in putting to flight the whole of Ivan's craven band of boy-robbers, which we effected in about half a minute. Adashef was a grown man of about nineteen, and though not much taller or stronger than I, was active and a pretty fighter.'

The Grand Duke watched his men retreat pell-mell in every direction.

'I sicken of them,' he said aloud, 'more every day.'

'Have no more to do with them, Ivan Vasilitch, for God's sake,' said Adashef; 'take the counsel of those who wish you well!'

'Amen!' I said, heartily.

Ivan's passion had faded as quickly as it had come. He betrayed no shame for his late conduct, neither was he now angry with Adashef. He knew not right from wrong.

'Upon my word, I have a mind to dismiss them, every one, and take yourself and Stroganof as my men in their place!' continued the boy reflectively.

'Not to do your dirty work in the slums of this town!' said Adashef, and I concurred, though speaking more deferentially than he.

'Oh well,' said Ivan, 'if you can suggest any other way of passing the time I shall not object; I am dull enough; I am sick of street fights, and even pitching cats and dogs from the top of the Kremlin tower does not delight me as it used!'

On the way home Adashef spoke very much and very wisely as to the foolishness and wickedness of Ivan's behaviour; and the Grand Duke—being now in his best mood—took all that was said in good part: and this was the first move in the direction of better things.

CHAPTER III

THE YOUNG EAGLE RUFFLES HIS FEATHERS

My stay in the capital city was somewhat protracted, but we were back again at Perm, my uncle Simeón Stroganof, and I, long before the terrible results of Adashef's and my own remonstrances with the young Grand Duke set all Russia trembling and yet admiring, and fearing and yet hoping for the future. My uncle had obtained the concessions he required from Shuisky the regent ; that is, Shuisky had made him certain promises, but whether those promises would have been kept, but for the events which I am now about to describe, is very doubtful indeed.

Let me first mention one little matter. I had informed this Shuisky, in the assumed humility of one who confesses a great fault, that I had, at my first acquaintance with the prince, and before I fully knew who he was, caught up Ivan and pitched him into the stream.

As I told the tale Shuisky flushed red and started up ; he glanced at Belsky, who was present.

‘ What ! ’ he cried. ‘ You pitched the prince into

the river and pulled him out again ! fool, idiot ! why could you not have—'

'Andrey Ivanitch !' said Belsky, warningly. It was all I could do to avoid laughing, the comedy was so plain. Shuisky glanced again at his companion, and sat down suddenly.

'Is the boy not a fool and an idiot ?' he continued angrily ; 'to lay violent hands upon the Anointed of the Lord ? Why could you not have left him in peace, I say ? for this you shall suffer the severest punishment.'

But my young master would not hear of my suffering any kind of punishment for the ducking I gave him, though Shuisky exhibited great zeal in the matter, with the object of effacing from my mind any possible misconceptions founded upon his unguarded exclamations upon first hearing of the incident.

Nevertheless, I did not fail to inform the prince as to this, and the tale did not in any degree surprise him.

'I have long been assured,' he said, 'that Shuisky is my enemy, and desires my destruction rather than my welfare.'

'And yet you take delight in his applause and probation,' said Adashef, who was present, 'and do not understand that he encourages your misbehaviour and your excesses with these footpads, your confederates, in order that you may render yourself unpopular with your people and nobles, and that they may one

day, in the overflowing of their wrath, turn again and rend you. Be warned once again, Ivan Vasilitch, and turn from your evil ways. There is danger in the air !'

'I think,' said Ivan, 'that I am Grand Duke, and not Shuisky.'

'That is true,' said Adashef; 'you are Grand Duke of Muscovy and over all your subjects, Shuisky included.'

'So that if I insisted, my subjects would be bound to obey me rather than Shuisky, if we were to disagree?' said the prince.

'The Russian people would support the word of the prince against that of a usurping boyar; they have ever done so,' said Adashef; 'you are of the House of Rurik. Holy Mother of the Most Blessed,' he added, crossing himself most reverently, 'to think of a Prince of the House of Rurik demeaning himself by associating with a pack of juvenile robbers and highwaymen, lying in wait and robbing defenceless women and unsuspecting peasants and merchants!'

I quite expected the prince's iron-tipped staff to fly at these bold words of Adashef's, but the Grand Duke only frowned and was silent, and said not another word till we reached home. Within the court of the palace were assembled a number of Ivan's chosen confederates, the Gregorys and Timoféys of whom mention has been made, awaiting their leader's orders for the afternoon. When Ivan saw this com-

pany he flew into the greatest passion. He chased them from the courtyard with scarcely articulate cries, prodding at them with his ugly weapon, and wounding slightly at least one. At the gate he found his tongue.

‘ Go ! ’ he shrieked, ‘ every one of you, and return no more ! I have finished with you, you are they who come between me and my people, I will have no robbery and violence in my streets, you are disbanded, I loathe you and forget you henceforth, every one ; depart ! ’

And that was the end of the Duke’s wretched band of footpads, and of his own disgraceful conduct in the streets of the capital city.

Before my dear master died he reminded me of that scene and said, in his infinite kindness towards me, that it was through my words and conduct that he had been led to see the error of his ways, and had made this first great step in the direction of an improved life ; but though I may have contributed by my behaviour at our first meeting towards his conversion, yet I am convinced that it was to Adashef and to his impassioned words about the House of Rurik that my master really owed the true awakening of his soul !

The Grand Duke owed much more, in after years, to this great man ; and while Adashef and the monk Sylvester dominated him, which was for many a long and prosperous year, there did not exist a wiser or more

sober and benevolent prince in all the world than young Tsar Ivan, the first Russian Tsar or Cæsar, a title which he himself invented and adopted. It was not until his never to be sufficiently deplored quarrel with Adashef and Sylvester, that my poor master discovered once again those terrible traits of passion and inhumanity which the miscreant Shuisky had, in his youth, done everything to foster and develop ; and which the Tsar, in after years, himself so bitterly regretted !

But all this belongs to a later period. At the time of which I now write both Adashef and I quitted Moscow to return to our own homes, leaving our new friend, the young Grand Duke, to think over our counsels, and to act as he found best upon them.

Assuredly neither Adashef nor I ever for one moment anticipated so terrible an event (the first practical result of our talks with the prince) as that which I come now to describe. I was at Perm, of course, when it happened, and can only therefore relate the event at second-hand ; but my authority is of the best, since it is no other than Vorontsoff himself, a dear friend of mine, who was, as it shall soon be seen, a principal actor in the affair. Vorontsoff was a young boyar of about twenty years of age, rich and very noble, and had come to Moscow at the invitation, or rather at the summons of Shuisky, upon some plea in connection with the tributes due to the crown from the large land-owners.

Shuisky's policy was ever to impoverish and enfeeble all boyars and persons of position and authority in the empire, in order that when the time came for the passing of the imperial power and title into the hands of a subject, there should be none to compete with himself for this supreme position and dignity. Beyond all doubt Shuisky both expected and intended the throne to become vacant before its present occupant should have grown old enough and influential enough to maintain his own rights and position.

Therefore Shuisky milked the boyars, to use his own expression, like so many cows, and the quarrels between himself and the rest of the nobles were frequent and scandalous. There was anarchy throughout the realm during these few years of his regency, that is, from the day of the lamented death of the good mother of the prince and until—well, until that which I am now about to describe.

Vorontsoff had made himself exceedingly agreeable to the Grand Duke, and Ivan had become very fond of him during his short acquaintance with him. We also, Adashef and I, had seen Vorontsoff and liked him, and at our departure we commended the prince to his care, informing him privately of our distrust of Shuisky, as well as of our hopes for the awakening of our young master from the sleep and sloth of ignorance and unworthy, unprincely vice.

Some few weeks after our departure, Vorontsoff fell out with the minister. So far as I remember the

circumstance, the origin of the quarrel was Vorontsoff's refusal to pay that which was demanded of him 'for the maintenance of the Grand Duke.' The contention of the boyar was this, that nothing was spent upon the prince and his needs and education ; that all the money exacted under this head was expended upon Shuisky himself and his luxuries and aggrandisement, while the prince was left to starve, or next door to it, both physically and intellectually.

'All the world knows,' said brave Vorontsoff, 'that the Grand Duke is neglected and treated worse and with less sympathy than the child of the meanest peasant in the land ; also that you have designs, Andrey Ivanitch, upon the throne in case of any emergency !'

Shuisky was lolling in his favourite attitude in his cabinet, upon an arm-chair and with his feet resting on the bed which had been that of the late Grand Duke Vasili, Ivan's father. My master has often described to me this attitude, and his own rage to see the feet of this miscreant defile the couch whereon his great father had rested.

Ivan himself was present, seated on the floor and listening.

Up jumped Shuisky at the words of Vorontsoff, furious, pale with the madness of anger ; he said no word, but clapped his hands. Two attendants rushed in.

'Seize him, seize him !' cried Shuisky, pointing

towards Vorontsoff, ‘away with him to the flog-room, and see that he has twenty blows of the knoot !’

But my dear master, like a young lion, rose to his feet and shook his mane, and roared aloud.

‘Stop !’ he cried, ‘not a finger is laid upon this boyar.’ Vorontsoff has often told me how splendid the prince looked at this moment—how much a prince and how little a boy !

The attendants gazed about to right and left, bewildered, and uncertain what to do. Shuisky glared a moment at the Duke as though about to strike him. Then he turned to the men and stamped his foot.

‘Do you hear me ?’ he shouted, ‘seize him and away with him this instant—never mind that boy !’

Then the young lion, as lions do, abandoned himself to the passion of his rage. His eyes glowed like coals, and he stamped his foot with ten times the fury and fifty times the majesty of Shuisky ; the men had been about to obey the repeated orders of the regent, but paused, terrified and surprised at the aspect of the prince.

‘Stop,’ he said, with marvellous dignity and composure, considering his passion and his years. ‘Vorontsoff, kill those persons if they dare to disobey my orders. Listen, fools that you are : It is I that am Grand Duke of Moscow, and not this Shuisky : you are my servants, not his ; I am Grand Duke also over Shuisky. I command you to seize *him*, and not this





'Now march,' said Ivan, pointing to the door

boyar ; seize him and convey him to the prison-room downstairs. This boyar shall slay you with his sword if you disobey ! ' Vorontsoff drew his sword ; the men hesitated : Shuisky stood trembling, surprised and bewildered, and uncertain what course to pursue. The men whispered to one another, and one took hold of Shuisky's arm ; the other hesitated, but on Vorontsoff making a movement he, too, grasped the regent by the arm.

' Now march ! ' said Ivan, pointing to the door ; and, followed by Vorontsoff and by the prince himself, the procession departed down the stairs and into the prison-room below, Shuisky still too amazed and bewildered to resist.

He struggled, indeed, within the dungeon-like chamber itself ; but by that time the men had accustomed themselves to consider the prince as their master and this man as prisoner, and his struggles were vain.

So Shuisky was locked up, regent though he was, by a young Grand Duke of scarcely fourteen summers ; and had it ended there it would have been well for Shuisky, but it did not.

After the prisoner had been secured the Grand Duke sent Vorontsoff and others to convene a meeting of all the boyars to be found in Moscow. The demon of rage was still holding court in his young soul, but his self-control and dignity were, from Vorontsoff's account, and by all accounts, simply marvellous.

So also at the assembly of amazed and wondering boyars, convened in hot haste by his orders, the bearing of our young Russian Grand Duke was the very example of all dignity and majesty, and his address to the assembled nobles and magnates was as surprising in its eloquence, having in mind the age of the speaker, as it was in its purport.

The prince harangued his principal subjects upon the folly and wickedness of the boyar class throughout the empire, but especially in Moscow. Though very young, he said, he was nevertheless aware of the mischief that stalked abroad among them : of how each thought and strove for himself and his own aggrandisement, instead of for the welfare of the State and of its ill-treated and neglected head. He was also aware of the many and great abuses perpetrated in his name throughout the land ; and the time had come when he, the representative of Rurik, could no longer withhold his tongue nor restrain his hand, but must assert himself and the dignity of the throne of Muscovy. Many of those present were undoubtedly worthy of condign punishment ; but in his royal clemency he had resolved (said this sovereign of fourteen summers !) to forgive all, save one, and that by far the greatest offender of them all. Shuisky was that one. Shuisky was infinitely the most villainous of all his boyars ; and, as the worst, he should be the one to suffer.

The punishment of the victim was dreadful. In

after years my master spoke of it with sorrow, as of one of his lapses into inhumanity; but he invariably added that Shuisky, nevertheless, deserved any fate that could have been meted out to him, so vile an enemy was he to his country. In a word, the prince commanded that he should be taken forthwith and cast into an enclosure in which were kept a pack of peculiarly vicious and ferocious wolf-hounds—wild creatures that none could approach with safety excepting their keepers.

By these dreadful animals Shuisky was instantly torn to pieces; and so perished, at the bidding of a youth of fourteen, one of the worst men that Russia has ever brought forth. May God have mercy upon his sins, which were many!

From this terrible day onward my young master was the undisputed head of this great realm. Abuses were put down; the misrule of the boyar class was checked and gradually abolished; good and great men were chosen by the young Duke for his advisers and ministers; and though he lapsed occasionally, during the first two years of his real reign, into those paroxysms of passion which betrayed the lower depths of his duplex individuality, yet he was far more often at his best than at his worst, at this time, and the affairs of the empire undoubtedly gained by his assumption into his boy-hands of the direction of the helm of the State.

Truly a great Russian was my master, who could effect all this when scarcely in his teens, and in spite of the disadvantages and disabilities of his boyhood under the festering wickedness and neglect of Shuisky's guardianship.

CHAPTER IV

A WOLF FIGHT

SINCE it is my intention to write down rather a record of my own doings and adventures than a history of my master, Ivan the Fourth of Russia, I must now leave the Grand Duke in Moscow, under the safe guardianship of his mother's relatives, the Glinskys, now restored (thanks to Shuisky's fall) to power, and introduce my own family and neighbours, especially one who is destined to play an important *rôle* in this narrative, in connection both with myself personally and also with the relations between myself and my master, which alone, after all, can give any importance to my records.

My relative Simeón Stroganof was the head of the family. He was the brother of my father, who was dead. Simeón was a great landowner and merchant—a boyar, of course, and rich. His entire being was devoted to the making of a great estate and the gathering together of riches. My brothers Maxim and Nikita were quite of their uncle's stamp—earnest in business, thinking little of outdoor sports and the

usual occupations and recreations of young men of their age (they were seventeen and eighteen years old at this time), and devoting themselves to the development of the timber and salt and other trades which they carried on together with our uncle Simeón. As for me, nature had formed me of a different material, for I never took the slightest interest in the commercial pursuits which delighted them, but, even at my then age of about fifteen, only in the life of the open air—in hunting and swimming and adventure of every kind. My uncle had hoped to interest me in the family struggle for wealth and aggrandisement by taking me with him to Moscow, as described above; but, beyond imbuing me with a strange affection for my young sovereign (strange, because he had certainly not revealed himself at his best during our short acquaintance, for all that he had contrived to exercise so great a fascination over me!), my trip to Moscow had resulted in little, changing neither my opinion of sit-at-home merchants, nor my scorn for money-making. My opinion of my brothers was a poor one. I could tolerate my uncle's love for commerce and barter—firstly, because he was, though still a comparatively young man, considerably older than ourselves; and, secondly, because he was head of the family, and I recognised the fact that some one of us must, after all, look after the family estate and affairs; but I regarded my brothers with scorn, because they would take no part

in my huntings and adventurous ridings into the Ural country, and in other enterprises in which my soul took great delight. They had no time, they said, for frivolities and boyish escapades, for the Stroganofs were destined to play a great part in the world and they must see to the fulfilment of the family destiny.

I may say that prophecies in this sense had been freely put forth and circulated for a generation or two by the *Znahars* and *Znaharkas*, the soothsayers male and female, of Perm, and were implicitly believed by most of us. One of these prophecies ran, I remember, to this effect : ‘The Stroganofs take the East in their hand and place it in the Tsar’s hands, and the Tsar rejoices because he has seen the West depart from him.’

I used to laugh at this oracular utterance because, so far as I could make out, it could not possibly mean anything whatever, and the *Znahar* who pronounced it must simply, so I held, be an unfortunate—that is, a godsman or lunatic. But now, in my old age, I understand that there is more in these things than appears.

Our nearest boyar neighbours were the Krilofs, who lived in summer fifteen miles or so away, eastwards, and on the road to Molebsk. Of this family we Stroganofs professed to know nothing, because, owing to a very ancient family feud as to which I need not enter into explanations, we were not upon speaking terms. The Krilofs never came to Perm, our town ; and we never went to Molebsk, theirs. I believe my brothers and uncle actually had not even so much

as heard their names, and certainly did not know them by sight. It was different with me.

At this time I was already interested in one member, at least, of the Krilof family—the girl Vera; as for the rest, I knew some of them by sight, but we were not on speaking or bowing terms. I must put upon record my first meeting with Vera—hey me! what a number of years ago! Let me see; I was not yet fifteen then and I am sixty now, and my dear master has been dead five years—he would have been sixty also—dear, dear! to think of us two as old men—us two boys, ha! ha! And Vera, too, she is—

But I am proving myself the old man by allowing my tongue to run away with me. What we have to consider now is my first meeting with Vera Krilof.

I was hunting hares with my two Siberian hounds, Borka and Borza. These two dogs were my inseparable companions; they were long-limbed, lithe, long-nosed dogs, as fast and active as English greyhounds, and not unlike them in length of limb and head, but of a stouter build and far stronger and braver. I used them both for running down wolves and for hunting hares, and they were equally useful for either purpose.

On this particular afternoon in early spring, I was some ten miles from home, in the direction of Molebsk and the Urals, and was riding in search of hare tracks through a somewhat wild pine forest, when suddenly Borza pricked up his ears and started forward at a quicker rate, Borka following suit.

'A hare!' I thought, and spurred up old Daniel, my pony—a wiry Cossack, that would gallop fifty miles without being aware that he had well started.

But presently I heard sounds in the distance; a human shout or two, as it seemed, and the snarling of wild animals.

Scenting an adventure, I jogged up Daniel, and we flew after the two dogs, who had taken a good lead of twenty yards and were making splendid pace through the pine-trees in the direction of the sounds. It was not long before we came in sight of the scene whence the hubbub proceeded, and a curious and remarkable scene it was. I close my eyes and see it vividly before my face now, forty-five years after—I see every detail.

First there was the carcase of a horse, or what was left of it, being torn to shreds by half a dozen wolves. Then, his back to a tree, there was a youth of about sixteen or seventeen, hunting-knife in hand, shouting and stabbing vigorously enough at four other wolves, which stood in a half-circle about him, approaching and receding, snarling, foaming, darting in, receiving a blow or an attempted blow, and dodging back, besieging their antagonist pretty closely. Lastly, and most important of all, at the side of this shouting, fighting youth there stood another figure, a young girl of about my own age, upright, slim, black-haired, white-browed, most beautiful—as even then I found time to observe, the impression being,

no doubt, an unconscious and irresistible one. The girl was fighting also, but not shouting. Her lips were set, and she wielded a riding-whip, with which she belaboured the wolves whenever one rushed within reach. The whip was clubbed, but even thus was harmless, I should say, against the thick skulls of her assailants; but the brave girl fought with it, nevertheless, as earnestly as though the weapon were an axe, and every blow from it would tell upon her enemies.

The situation of the boy and the girl was without doubt extremely critical, and I shudder to think what would have been their fate had Providence not sent me to hunt the hare in those parts that afternoon.

As it was, Borka and Borza each laid a wolf by the throat in quicker time than the words can be written or read. For myself, being armed with my gun (a rarity in that day, and the intensely-valued gift of my uncle, who brought it from Moscow for me), I, too, accounted for one wolf very speedily, and the fourth having quickly disappeared on catching sight of Borka and Borza, I turned my attention to the group which were engaged upon the carcase of the horse.

Meanwhile the youth had stabbed the two animals secured by the hounds, and my two faithful companions now bounded to my side, to take part in further conquests. Though unwilling to relinquish their banquet, the six remaining wolves drew off, snarling and

threatening, less willing to fight than to feast. Borza and Borka, however, would take no denial, and each quickly engaged a second antagonist, the rest instantly disappearing ; and with the stabbing of these two the battle ended, and I was at liberty to give my attention to the youth and the maiden to whose aid we had so providentially arrived.

The girl stood over the remains of the half-eaten horse, and her eyes, I saw, had filled with tears. She dashed them away as she observed me looking at her, and frowned. Then she smiled.

'God sent you in time to save Andrey and myself,' she said, 'but not poor Vaiska ! I wish you had arrived five minutes sooner !'

'So do I,' I said, 'if you do !'

'Oh, we should have beaten them off in a minute or two !' said the youth. I could not resist bursting into a loud laugh.

'What, ten wolves to one dagger ?' I said.

'And a brave heart and two strong arms !' added the youth.

'Say, at least, *two* brave hearts and a riding-whip,' said I, still laughing.

The girl laughed also, and her eyes flashed gratefully, I thought, at me.

'Don't be foolish, Andrey,' she said, 'and ungrateful ; this lad and his dogs have saved us, and we thank them.'

'Oh, yes, we thank them,' assented the youth,

but not very cordially. ‘We should have been all right if that brute Ufa had not played the fool, curse him! I shall half kill him for this if I find him at home in his stable!’ I learned afterwards that, pursued by the wolves, the brother and sister had galloped homewards through the woods, keeping well in front of their pursuers, until Ufa, Andrey’s horse, had shied and thrown him and bolted. At this the girl had pulled up and dismounted on the instant, the wolves falling upon her pony immediately and tearing it to pieces, while she placed herself at Andrey’s side, just as I had found her.

Nothing was said as to Vera’s splendid and heroic conduct at this time; I did not know of it until long afterwards.

I took a dislike to Andrey from the first moment. If his sister had not been present now, I believe I should have chastised him for his ingratitude at that, our very first meeting, though he had quite a two-years’ advantage over me. But I was interested in the girl Vera, and wished to hear more of her voice and less of his. I called up my dogs and bade them greet her. Borka and Borza went, at my bidding, and laid their long faces in her lap as she sat, one from one side and the other from the opposite, and looked kindly up in her eyes.

‘What dear dogs!’ she said; ‘look, Andrey.’

‘They are fairly good hounds,’ said he, ‘but we have a dozen better at Molebsk.’

'That I'll wager you have not,' said I warmly.

'Considering that I have seen both those and these, and you only these, the wager would be a foolish one on your part!' said the youth haughtily.

I turned from him angrily, for the very look of the fellow made my fingers itch to chastise him. My old Cossack pony, Daniel, stood close by, half asleep; I had not tied him up, because I knew well that neither wolf nor devil nor anything else would cause old Daniel to lose his head; and if he saw me dismounted among the wolves he would wait, in full confidence upon my sagacity, and perhaps sleep quietly until I remounted.

'Daniel shall carry you home,' I said, addressing the girl at my side, 'if you can sit him without a saddle?' I never used a saddle myself.

Vera laughed merrily.

'A saddle!' she repeated, 'I? As soon I would ride in an arm-chair. I have never tried a saddle. But I will walk with Andrey—it is not far, five miles, perhaps. Nevertheless, I thank you for the offer.'

'Daniel shall carry you both,' I said; 'the wolves are about; you cannot walk unarmed all that distance. I am armed and have the dogs; I will call for the horse afterwards.'

'I am not afraid,' said Vera. And I am certain that this was the plain truth. Nevertheless, Andrey recommended that my offer should be accepted; the walk was somewhat dangerous, and besides Vera was

not accustomed to walking, and it would be rather far for her, who always rode.

So the two mounted old Daniel, who looked inquiringly at me, being somewhat surprised, though it took a good deal to surprise old Daniel.

'All right, Daniel,' I said, 'go ahead! Whom shall I ask for at Kamka?' I added, as they rode quietly off. Kamka was the village at which they had said they were at present residing, although Molebsk was their town home. The youth laughed haughtily. 'I forgot,' he said; 'it is so unusual that anyone should be unacquainted with our names in these parts; I am Prince Krilof.'

'Good heavens!' I blurted out foolishly, and flushing deeply, 'and is *she* a Krilof, then? What a terrible misfortune!' This was a very imbecile speech, but my next was even feebler:

'I am Stroganof, you see,' I stammered, 'and if I had known—'

'*What!*' cried Krilof, '*you* a Stroganof! Come, Vera, off with you; I wish to heaven he and his mongrel dogs had stayed away; you would not be beholden to a Stroganof! Off with you, I say; we will walk!'

'Do not speak like a fool, Andrey,' said Vera, dismounting, however, as she spoke; 'you would have been eaten by the wolves 'ere this but for him and his dogs.' She flashed her great eyes at me, and added: 'We thank you for your timely help, but we—I—wish you were not a Stroganof!' With that she and he

walked away, leaving me standing like a stuffed animal beside Daniel, who stood like another. She turned once and I was almost sure she smiled ; but he never looked round at all.

I stood for several minutes dazed, and with my blood running like a mill-race through my head, too bewildered and stunned to think ; then it struck me that I had better follow them at a distance, in case of accidents, for wolves are uncanny folk to deal with. So I roused Daniel, who slept peacefully at my side, whistled up Borka and Borza, and went in pursuit. I dared not come close up, but once or twice I caught sight of a fluttering white skirt through the trees, and this was a comfort to me ; and so I followed the Krilos all the way to Kamka. I was under the impression that I was unobserved ; but I have since learned that one, at least, of the two knew all the while that I was at hand !

CHAPTER V

PRINCESS VERA

Not yet fifteen years of age, and in love! This appears somewhat absurd, I know, and yet undoubtedly such was the case; I was certainly in love.

Some persons develop both physically and intellectually earlier than others, and both in bodily and also in mental growth, I was one of the rapid developers. I was at this time fully as tall and probably much stronger than most boys of seventeen years old, and had, moreover, acquired a habit of living within myself, as the result of the want of sympathy between my brothers and me, which habit had probably quickened my intelligence so that I was more of a man than my age would indicate.

And so also in matters of the heart it must be assumed that I was somewhat exotic in my development; for this love which I now felt, was serious enough; it was, indeed, in no way allied to that feeble sentiment usually associated with boys in their first excursions into Cupid's domains, but a strong and ruling passion which wore well and did not disappear with my teens.

So then, I was in love, and with a Krilof. This was unfortunate; but, as I assured myself at the time, I had no personal share in the family feud existing between her people and mine, neither had she. What was it to us that our ancestors had desired to cut one another's throats? If she cared as little as I for the ancient quarrel, it should not stand between us for one moment. Nevertheless, since her relatives would probably be of a different opinion, there would be great difficulties in my courtship of this young lady, and the contemplation of these difficulties rendered me sorrowful and dejected as I wandered through the woods on the morning after my first meeting with Vera. I wandered thus every day, accompanied always by Borka and Borza, and mounted invariably upon old Daniel. I knew every yard of the country for miles around, and any one of us four (the two dogs I mean, and the pony and myself), if blindfolded and set down anywhere within ten miles of our home, in the densest forest, would have recognised the spot at a glance and headed straight for Perm. On this particular morning, whether consciously or unconsciously, I rode straight as a line for the village of Kamka, where I had last caught a glimpse of my charmer; but whether I had any settled plan as to my movements when I should arrive there, I cannot say with certainty. I do not think I had. I felt that I must go to Kamka, I believe, and that was all—and to Kamka I went. We hunted a hare or

two on the way, but so far as any ardour on my part was concerned, the quarry might have escaped us and welcome. It was seldom, however, that poor pussy escaped when Borka and Borza were in the field and on her tracks ; for they were Black Death to all their enemies, were those superb dogs ; and, as a matter of fact, two or three hares now hung over Daniel's haunches as he ambled along through the trees.

Close to the village of Kamka, just where a rustic road turns at an angle out of the cultivated land surrounding the huts of the peasants, and enters the forest, I rode straight into a cavalcade of horsemen—three youths, armed with flint guns and accompanied by a whole pack, of a dozen or so, of hounds, of the same breed as my own, which was a common type of dog about our part of the world. There were half a dozen serfs with them, all armed and mounted. One of the well-dressed young men in front of the cavalcade was my acquaintance of yesterday, Prince Andrey Krilof, and I concluded, as soon as I caught sight of the party, that they were going to search for the rest of the wolf-pack of the previous day, and wipe them out of existence with hound and gun. Borka and Borza sniffed and snarled with the strange dogs, and the meeting at first looked as though it must end in a fight ; but—as dogs do—they settled the matter amicably and no blood was shed.

We humans were less friendly to one another than they.

Andrey started and flushed when he saw me : ‘It is that Stroganof cub,’ I heard him tell his companions—his two brothers as I afterwards learned. I took off my cap, perhaps unconsciously ; it is a courtesy that every Russian offers to an acquaintance, even peasant to peasant. Only one of the three brothers returned the salutation. This irritated me.

‘It is customary to bow to an acquaintance,’ I said angrily, ‘even though he may have taken the liberty to save your life without permission.’

‘If I am to bow to those who saved my life, then I must salute these dogs, not you !’ said Andrey, impertinently, and he removed his cap and bowed low towards the place where Borka and Borza were comparing notes with the others of their species. Both of his companions laughed at this sally, which struck me as being both rude and ungrateful.

I said nothing, however, and Andrey resumed, taking advantage of my embarrassment.

‘And what, may I ask,’ he continued, ‘brings a Stroganof on two consecutive days into the private domains of the Krilofs ?’

‘I ride where I please !’ I said, blushing.

‘And take what you please also, it appears,’ cried Krilof, glancing at the game I had with me ; ‘those hares, I doubt not, were killed upon our land.’

‘The land may be yours,’ I said, ‘but the game that runs or flies is God’s.’

‘Not so,’ said Andrey ; ‘it is the gift of God to us

who own the soil, just as the wheat is that grows upon it ; and he who hunts the hare upon our land robs us of our own.'

This was a new theory to me, who had hitherto looked upon game of every kind as no man's property, except his who captures or kills it. I laughed mockingly, and said if that was his opinion, he was welcome to his hares ; and with the words I took the game and threw it in his face, knocking his cap off.

Andrey flushed red, and grabbed at his hunting-knife as though to attack me, but his brother caught his arm and prevented him. A serf picked up his cap and handed it to him ; he glared at me, muttering something.

'Come away, brother,' said one of the others ; 'this is unseemly. He has no manners, but he is a Stroganof, and only a boy.'

'Oh, stay on, if you please,' said I, foolishly. 'Boy though I be, I am man enough for two or three Krilos, I dare say ; and as for manners, this fellow had not the politeness to return my bow until I knocked his cap off for him !'

To this foolishness I received no reply and deserved none, and presently the cavalcade rode away, leaving me. But ere they departed Andrey found occasion to level one more insult at me.

'Matvey,' he said, addressing one of the serfs, 'ride back and warn the Princess Vera to remain at home to-day ; there are rogues about, tell her.'

I would gladly have destroyed the speaker, then and there ; but, feeling that my case was a hopeless one for the moment, I contented myself with the promise of dire vengeance upon this detestable and ungrateful person at the very first opportunity.

Then, since I was unwilling to appear before my charmer in the character of a rogue, against whom she had been warned to protect herself, I rode slowly and moodily homewards, as angry and vindictive a youth as existed in all Russia.

But anger fades with the hours of day, and true love does not ; and when the evening came I had decided that, whether I met and chastised Andrey or not—though of course I hoped that I should—I must in any case ride to Kamka again the next morning, and contrive to catch a glimpse of my princess ; for I felt that my heart would certainly burst if I did not see her.

To my uncle and brothers I said nothing about having seen the Krilofs ; still less inclined was I to mention that I had fallen in love. I could not bring myself to speak of such a thing to them ; their commercial minds could never, I thought, have grasped the idea of love. They would have said I was mad—which they often affirmed even without this excuse—or they might have said something to irritate me, and this would have been a pity, for I loved my brothers well in spite of their absolute want of sympathy for my turn of mind, and of mine for theirs.

And so, on the following day, I rode with my usual companions through the forest, and again Kamka was the objective point for our journey. This time I did not meet my enemy Andrey, nor his brothers ; but I suddenly came upon a far more welcome sight ; for, as I rode slowly through a pine-glade a mile or two from the village, there was the Princess Vera herself, mounted upon a beautiful Cossack pony, and riding in the same direction as I, and only fifty yards ahead of me. I spurred old Daniel on, and my charmer, hearing the clattering of his hoofs behind her, looked round.

She blushed when she saw me—that much I was certain of—and then she frowned and turned her horse aside into the forest without a word or a look of greeting. My heart sank when I saw this ; for, I thought, a cherished family feud, as a sort of outer line of defence, would render the capture of the citadel, her affections, additionally difficult. Nevertheless, I did not despair, but directed old Daniel into the line my charmer had taken, following close upon her ; that is, about ten yards behind, Borka and Borza accompanying me, one on each side, and doubtless wondering at this new kind of chase.

I had no idea whither Vera was directing her course, but I saw with some satisfaction that at all events it was not towards Kamka. Her pony was a beautiful creature and moved superbly, and had I bestridden any horse in our stables other than old

Daniel, she would have outstripped me hopelessly that day. But old Daniel held his own easily.

Mile followed upon mile, and still this odd chase went on, and presently I realised that if Vera pursued her present course a little farther we should reach the banks of the Kama, and then, I thought exultantly, I should have her; for when she turned—as turn she must—she would confront me, and then she could not very well ignore altogether my presence, and must surely speak.

For up to now no word or look had been interchanged between us; the ride had been as silent as the flight of time itself, and, saving that first rapid glance, she had betrayed no consciousness whatever of my presence.

In a very few minutes the river came in sight. I could see its wide bosom gleaming in the sunshine, glittering here and there between the tree-trunks, and I rejoiced at the sight, for I knew this foolish pursuit would now end, and I should at least have the delight of looking once more in her eyes, even though she were still obstinate and refused to speak to me.

I have since that day thought and laughed many and many a time over that odd love-chase of our boy and girl days, but I certainly found nothing in it to laugh at at the time. On the contrary, though quite in love with this girl, I was waxing very angry with her, for, as a matter of fact, I have never, from my earliest youth, taken kindly to the opposing of other

wills to my own—and I never hunted hare or fox with more determination to capture my quarry than did I now pursue this incomprehensible but irresistible little princess.

And now the river bank was all but reached, and I spurred old Daniel forward, in order to be at her very elbow when she should turn and face me.

But Vera turned neither to the right hand nor to the left. She raised her arm as she approached the bank, and encouraging her pony by word and gesture, plunged with him straight into the stream, to my great and almost boundless astonishment and consternation, for I had not dreamt of the girl committing so foolish an act, the season being spring-time and the river at flood with melted snows, and very rapid and wide, and consequently dangerous.

Daniel and I were not long in following her lead, however ; we had forded and swum many a stream together, he and I, and thought little of such things : though I should have hesitated before attempting the Kama at full flood, but for the necessity of following this foolish girl in her mad enterprise. As we sprang from the bank I saw Vera turn her head for the first time—to see, doubtless, whether I had followed her ; and finding that I was still in pursuit, she flashed her eyes at me and laughed aloud, saying something which I lost in the splash of our contact with the water. She headed for the opposite shore ; but I was well aware that she could never

stem this current, and that the farther she left this shore of ours, the more difficult would it be to return—as return she must or be swept away, hopelessly, by the swirl of mid-stream. Even now the current was taking her pony flankwise and twisting him half round towards me ; he was unaccustomed to this work, and was frightened by the rush of the water ; and fearing that he would lose his head and sink, I spurred Daniel and directed him slightly down-stream, in order to intercept his less experienced fellow and its precious burden.

In a moment I had overtaken them and laid hold of Vera's bridle. 'Come back,' I said, tugging it round, 'this is foolish play !'

'Let go,' cried Vera, 'are you frightened ? Let go, I say ; turn back if you fear to follow me across, but let go !' It was no time for courtesies and explanations ; I pulled her horse round and headed him for the shore, she shouting to me to let go, and, I think, even striking me with her riding-whip.

But whether that her pony was spent with his long gallop, or whether—which is more likely—he was less excellent as a swimmer than as a land-goer, he now showed signs of exhaustion, and, though we were not very far from shore and by no means in the worst of the current, it was clear that he could not stem the one and reach the other ; for all the splashing of his forelegs, desperately struggling, gained him not an inch of water shorewards, and his only pro-

gress was sideways—drifting, in fact, helplessly at the mercy of the stream.

I dropped the bridle, and seized Vera with my arm.

'Come,' I said, 'your horse is helpless; he will drown in a moment!'

But Vera, though pale now and evidently concerned for her horse's safety, shook me off and bade me let her be.

'Nay, you *shall* come,' I said, and placing my arm fairly round her waist, I lifted her from her own horse and placed her upon Daniel. Once I had done this, she struggled no more, but allowed me to hold her on, and then we found that she had abandoned her steed none too soon, for the next moment the poor animal was caught in a swirl of the current, was twisted round, struggling helplessly, splashed for an instant or two with knees showing above the surface in his frantic efforts to keep afloat, and then suddenly disappeared and was seen no more.

Good old Daniel brought his burden to shore in safety, though I eased him to some extent by slipping off and swimming alongside, holding by the bridle, and so, happily, we arrived in port.

I was prepared for scolding, and perhaps for scorn, but not for kindness; and therefore her first words, which were spoken in a gentle manner and with no appearance of anger, surprised and pleased me greatly. 'You have then,' she said, 'after all, some will of your own!'

'I am sometimes told that I have too much!' I said.

'Indeed?' she said, 'you surprise me.'

I could not imagine what she was driving at, and answered nothing.

'And yet,' she continued, 'you were easily persuaded, yesterday, to part with the game you had killed, at my brother's bidding! Perhaps your valour is not equal to your will-power?'

'No one has ever called me a coward yet,' I faltered.

'And yet you were frightened away from Kamka yesterday,' she retorted. 'Do you know what I hate worse than anything in the world?' she added, knitting her brows and bending a little towards me from Daniel's back—'a coward!'

'Your brother sent a serf with an insulting message to you about me,' I said blushing.

'I am acquainted with Andrey's ways,' she said, and there the conversation ended. We only spoke at intervals after this, and by the time we arrived at Kamka, or as close to the village as she would allow me to come, I had scarcely made any progress towards intimacy with Vera. She smiled, however, when we parted and said that it was well that I possessed a will of my own, though I had only exercised it over a weak girl. I flushed.

'If your brother is chastised one of these days,' I said hotly, 'he will have you to thank for it!'

'There, there, there!' she cried, laughing merrily, and her eyes flashing deliciously, 'there speaks a man at last! Men are made for fighting, and not for swallowing insults!' And with this she ran off through the trees, waving her hand and smiling as she disappeared.

And, in truth, she left me an exceedingly bewildered and astonished young man, for she was a harder nut than I had wit enough to crack at that time and for some while after; and all that I could comprehend of the matter now was, that here was a sister who, for some inscrutable reason, desired me, a stranger, or nearly so, to break her own brother's head—unless, indeed, she was anxious that I should get my own broken. And the upshot of the day's work was, that I was more determined than ever to pick a quarrel with Prince Andrey Krilof; and if I could oblige his sister by doing so, why, so much the better.

CHAPTER VI

AMONG THE BRIGANDS

It is my desire to avoid anything savouring of boastfulness in this record, and therefore I do not propose to enter into any details as to the occasion upon which the outstanding account between Prince Andrey Krilof and myself was settled. Suffice to say that on the day following the events just described I prepared myself for meeting my enemy, by cutting two bludgeons of green wood, of equal length and thickness, which, with my riding-whip, I carried in my hand as I rode ; and that, having met my man, hunting by himself in the forest, I soon caused him to quarrel with me and to agree to a settlement of matters in general by means of my two bludgeons, of which I gave him the choice. We were fairly equally matched in size and strength, though he was two years my senior, and we pounded one another freely ; but in the end I tired him out and brought him to earth, but without the breaking of bones or any serious hurt beyond bruises and contusions, of which I certainly had a fair share.

We were better friends after this battle than before it, for Andrey now treated me with respect ; and indeed for a while appeared, or perhaps allowed himself to appear, in a far more agreeable light from this day onward. But after our settlement I felt bound to insist upon his assistance in a hare-hunt (during which Borka and Borza showed their great superiority over his hounds—he declaring, however, that he possessed a dozen better than these at home), for I was desirous of making a little offering of three of these animals to the Princess Vera.

Andrey laughed when I bade him take the game and present it in my name to his sister. He flushed, and I cannot tell whether he understood the matter as I understood it or not ; if he did, it must have been a disagreeable duty to deliver that message. However, he said that his sister ‘ would doubtless be pleased to accept the gift,’ and it is certain that he performed the commission entrusted to him, for of this I received confirmation afterwards.

When next I met Vera, I was half afraid lest she should be colder than ever towards me, regarding my message to her as an impertinence, and perhaps indignant also by reason of my victory over her brother ; but, to my surprise and joy, the actual fact was exactly the opposite of what I had feared. Vera was frank and friendly, and made no allusion whatever to ancient feuds or to recent quarrels, but rode with me, and hunted with me, and conversed with perfect freedom.

Within a short while we had become intimate friends, and towards the end of the summer an adventure in which we were associated cemented our friendship, and revealed, with regard to her feelings for me, that which she must have known long since to be the condition of my own for her, though neither of us had used the language of love up to this time ; for I fancy girls, even young ones, are not slow to observe the awakening of the tender passion in the opposite sex when themselves are the object, even though the youth be both too awkward and too shy to state the fact in so many words—as I was !

We were riding through the forest one afternoon, not far from the banks of the Kama river, talking, I think, about my Moscow experiences and the vagaries and eccentric enterprises of the young Grand Duke, our sovereign, the tale of whose horrible vengeance upon Shuisky had lately reached us. Vera was never tired of hearing about this extraordinary young prince and of my association with him, and of the good influence which Adashef and I had endeavoured to exert over him ; and especially the story of my ducking of his Majesty and the rest in the stream, which exercised an extraordinary fascination over her. As she always declared, there must be the elements both of greatness and goodness in Ivan, or he could never have forgiven me the terrible insult of having plunged my sovereign in the stream !

Greatness and goodness, indeed ! there was much

of both in my dear master, as those who knew him best are well aware ; greatness more than that of any Russian since the world began ; and goodness—what human being is always good ? Only by the mercy of the Highest can the best of us keep sin from his gate for awhile !

But my old man's pen is running away with me again.

We were wandering, Vera and I, as I said, by the Kama shore, conversing happily and thinking of no impending evil, when there suddenly sprang out from behind tree trunks and aspen bushes, which abounded there, several wild-looking men, who, I could tell at a glance, were strangers to our part of the country. Two of the fellows grasped my bridle, and another pair seized Vera's rein, one on each side.

I must confess that I entirely lost my presence of mind for the first moment, the attack was too sudden. Had I been as prompt to resist as were Borka and Borza, I might have dashed my men aside, ridden down Vera's assailants, and galloped safely away with her. But I was surprised, and allowed the fellows to seize and hold my bridle, and so the opportunity was lost. The two dogs instantly pinned each a man, but I called them off, fearing for their safety, and bade them depart home, which they immediately did, looking ashamed, and imagining, doubtless, that they had offended. As for me, I slipped suddenly back over the tail of Daniel, and made for those who





I struggled ineffectually while Vera slashed at the men
with her riding whip

held Vera's bridle ; but I was quickly seized and captured, though I fought and struggled violently.

Meanwhile, beyond a few inarticulate cries or shouts from the attacking party, there had been nothing said ; indeed, all that I have so far described passed in less time than is occupied in writing a single line of this history. But now a voice made itself heard—a strong authoritative voice, rough but not unkindly in tone.

'By the prophet !' it cried, 'that is a young spit-fire of the first order—secure him, you, Abdul—but don't hurt him. Secure the girl—some of you.'

The man addressed as Abdul bound me round the arms with a red cloth band—a long thing which he unwound from about his waist—I struggling ineffectually ; while two others went to lift Vera from her saddle. But my splendid Vera here asserted herself. She clubbed her whip as she had done to beat off the wolves at our first meeting, and struck out at the first who offered to touch her.

'Hands off !' she cried, so haughtily that her assailants drew back for a moment and looked to their chief, as though uncertain as to how they should act ; 'hands off ! I allow no one to touch me !'

The chief laughed aloud, and bade the men remove the girl.

Again the fellows advanced, and once more they recoiled, as Vera, with flashing eyes, struck them over face and hands with her whip, calling them dogs, cowards, and other contemptuous names.

I joined in with her in this abuse, and cried :

' Let her alone, you cowards ; or release me, and I will fight you one by one, or two by two, beginning with that guffawing ruffian there ! ' with which I nodded towards the chief.

' Brave, brave, brave ! ' the latter laughed. ' I like him—I like them both—let her alone, Hassan, only hold the bridle—and now march, all of you. Don't hurt that boy ; if I mistake not, he is worth a good ransom ! '

So we all moved away, Vera unmolested and still mounted, thanks to her own courage and the kindness of our chief captor ; I bound, but not very tightly, and afoot; old Daniel, bucketting, led by two of the robbers ; Borka and Borza, fortunately, out of sight and safe, for which they might thank my training and their own obedience.

I had leisure to observe the chief of the band as we marched towards the river, and I may here say that I was in no kind of doubt as to who both he and they might be. I had heard of the late arrival in these parts of a strong Cossack marauding band, which made its home on the water, going from place to place in oar-barges or galleys, and living by plunder and ransom upon the inhabitants of the provinces through which they passed. Their chieftain was one Yermak, a young man of about twenty-five years of age, a Cossack and a hetman or ataman, though a nomad and a buccaneer of hopelessly vagabond tastes and

with no settled home of his own. This man was said to possess immense influence over his followers, and to have met with extraordinary success in his nefarious profession throughout the Don and Volga provinces, which he had, presumably, exhausted for the time being, since he had now honoured our own Kama district with his attentions.

He was a striking-looking person, of middle height, but with shoulders and chest of extraordinary breadth. His eyes were black and of a strangely penetrating type, flashing when he spoke like two gems in the sun-rays. His nose was less flat than is usual in Tartars, to which race, it was said, he belonged; and his mouth opened widely when he smiled, as he often did, and revealed a double line of splendid white teeth. He wore sword and large pistols in the belt of his kaftan, as well as more than one long knife with worked silver handles. His handsome face was crowned with a conical cap, of which the lower half was Astrachan lamb's-wool and the top a rich velvet of deep red colour.

I was gazing into this man's face as we walked along, wondering whether this was indeed that Yermak of whom I had heard much of late, and with whose wild life I was conscious of feeling much sympathy—though my imagination revolted against his unscrupulous warfare against the property of others—when he turned his curious eyes upon me and returned my gaze for an instant or two without speaking.

'Yes, I am Yermak,' he said presently, and apparently in answer to my thoughts, for I had said nothing.

I flushed with surprise that he should have read my secret soul in this way, and perhaps with some annoyance, also, for I prefer to keep my thoughts to myself.

'Are you a wizard, then, as well as a robber and a murderer?' I said.

'I am no murderer,' he replied; 'we take no lives, if we can help it. Why should we, since wealth is our object, and ransoms are more profitable than blood-shed? As for being a wizard, I am enough of that to guess that you two young people are of the Stroganofs.'

'Then you are only half a wizard,' I said, 'for the *boyarishnya* is of the Krilofs, though you are right as to me.' I do not know why I gave him this information, unless it was in the fond hope of terrifying him by revealing into what hornets'-nests he had placed his hands in meddling with us two; for of course the Stroganofs and the Krilofs represented all the power and wealth of the district for a hundred miles around. Yermak flushed as I made the communication; but it was clearly not terror that moved him, but rather surprise and exultation.

'Ah!' he said, 'good again! A bird from each covey; this is better than I expected!'

'Is it?' I said haughtily; 'the Stroganofs and

Krilofs are ill folks to meddle with in these parts, as even a Yermak may find ! ' Yermak laughed.

' Poor Yermak ! he cried, ' thou must take heed to thyself ! Are they all spitfires like you ? ' he added, — ' and like the little lady yonder ? '

' That you shall find out for yourself,' I said haughtily, relapsing into silence. As a matter of fact, I was rather doubtful as to how my good uncle and brothers would proceed in the event of their desiring to release me by force of arms, or to chastise my captors after that I should have been ransomed. For my relatives were men of peace, and our serfs and dependants were peaceful also, by circumstance and habit ; for the Cossacks had never before molested us, and our commercial and agricultural community were unused to the ways of war and violence. Nevertheless, it was necessary to preserve a bold and defiant attitude. Perhaps the Krilofs were more martial in their ideas than my Stroganof relations. As a matter of fact, I now know that Vera represented by far the most martial spirit amongst them all.

Arrived at the Kama's bank, Vera and I were placed in a small boat, one of several, and conveyed towards an island in mid-stream. Skirting this island and reaching the other side of it, we came in sight of two large galleys, hidden entirely from that bank of the stream from which we had come, and into one of these we were directed to climb. There was a kind of pavilion over the stern of the vessel, and into this

we were escorted by Yermak himself. A little child, a girl of about five years of age, was running about at play, shrieking with childish delight over some game in which her mother—a handsome Tartar woman, gorgeously dressed—joined. The little one stopped short as she caught sight of us, and stood silent and open-mouthed to gaze at us, and Yermak caught her up in his arms to fondle and caress her.

CHAPTER VII

A NIGHT SWIM

OUR stay on board of Yermak's galley was somewhat prolonged, but it would be untrue to say that I greatly disliked my captivity. In the first place, I was constantly with Vera, who, for her part, was not unhappy either. Yermak was kind and friendly to us, and we were free to walk about and do what we liked within the limited area of the galley's deck and pavilion. We had removed from our position behind the island to a wide, open reach of water, and were now at anchor in the very middle of the stream, with nearly half a mile of tumultuously flowing Kama between us and either shore. In releasing me of my bonds, Yermak had alluded to this fact, and had said that though he doubted not I was the kind of lad who would swim as well as most, I had, nevertheless, better not attempt to escape by water, since his men were continually on the watch on deck; and besides this, the current was dangerous and the stream wide, and it would be madness to attempt it. Nothing should happen to us if we behaved ourselves with docility, he said. To

which I replied that, though I could swim a little, yet I had no mind to be drowned or shot, which answer seemed to satisfy him better than it should have pleased him; but, fortunately, he could not always read the thoughts of my brain. Had he done so, he would have seen that in my inner being I was full of exquisite mirth to think that anyone could suppose half a mile of Kama water would suffice to separate me from the desire of my heart. The Kama and I were old friends, and understood one another thoroughly! If I had been alone I could have escaped at any moment; that is, if there had been no one to consider but myself; but, of course, there was Vera. I suppose Yermak delayed a few days before applying to our friends for the price of our freedom, in order that our relatives might become during that period increasingly anxious on account of our disappearance, and the more willing to pay when they should hear of our safety. At any rate, he made no move for nearly a week, and my captivity began to grow irksome to me, pleasant as it was to be near Vera. Yermak was the most devoted of fathers, and took an extraordinary delight in his little daughter, with whom this rough brigand would play, like another child, for an hour at a time. To us he was invariably kind, and loved to rally us, or me, perhaps I should say, especially, upon my evident attachment to my beautiful princess; he had a mind, he would sometimes say, to get me ransomed first, because he could then assure himself

of a great price for Vera's freedom, seeing that I would add my wealth to that of her own folk, in order to recover her. This threat of Yermak's, though intended, I believe, in jest, greatly incensed and alarmed me, and I determined that under no circumstances would I consent to obtain my freedom if I must leave Vera in captivity. Better to attempt escape together than submit to separation, even though escape appeared a difficult, if not an impossible matter.

Our opportunity came at the end of a week. One evening Yermak left the galley, taking an escort of a few armed men, in order, as he said, to journey to Perm, that he might settle with my relatives for my release. The men left on deck as sentinels took advantage of the captain's absence to drink heavily. It was a dark night; everything was propitious for an attempt, and I whispered my plan to Vera as we leant together over the side of the barge and watched the dark water flow by beneath us.

'Can you swim, Vera?' I said.

'Of course,' said Vera, scornfully; 'what a question for a Kama-bred girl!'

'I thought so,' I replied; 'but you may need to be a good swimmer indeed to-night, for listen——' and I sketched out to her my plan of escape as I had evolved it. I should watch my opportunity when these drinking and brawling fellows were not looking out, and drop quietly into the stream, swimming straight to

the shore. There I should secure the small boat left by some of Yermak's men in the reeds, and row softly back. When I signalled to her by gently whistling she must drop into the water and swim a few yards down-stream, when I would pick her up.

It was a foolhardy enterprise at the best, especially when one considers that these brigands intended us no injury, and that our liberty could only be a matter of a few days at most. But I was always of that kind of disposition, that if there were two ways of attaining the same object, one safe and humdrum and the other dangerous and adventurous, I would certainly choose the alternative which presented the, to me, fascinating advantage of personal risk.

Vera, I found, was entirely of my way of thinking. When I revealed my plan to her, she seized my arm in her hands and pressed it.

'Sasha,' she whispered, this being the familiar form of my name, Alexander, 'it is splendid; I should die for shame to be bought out of this adventure; let us escape before Yermak returns to cart us back to our homes like strayed sheep!'

Here was spirit indeed! A girl after my own heart!

'But aren't you afraid of this wide stream?' I said, 'and the tremendous current that runs just here?'

I knew very well she was no more afraid of it than I, but I loved to see her eyes flash and to hear the

delicious scorn in her voice as she repudiated the idea of such a thing.

So all was settled between us, and half an hour later, the moon having obligingly retired behind a cloud, and the sentinels being extremely busy over their rye-brandy and their cards, I prepared myself for departure, slipping off my long boots, awkward for swimming in, and divesting myself also of my skirted kaftan.

'Farewell for the present, Vera,' I said, taking her hand in the darkness and pressing it. Then Vera surprised me. She clung to me tightly.

'Are you sure of yourself, Sasha?' she whispered, 'are you sure of yourself? It is very dark and a long swim to shore. Let me swim with you—we can encourage one another!' I could feel her trembling; it was the first time I had known her betray any kind of nervousness, and, as I say, it surprised me, for I did not then realise that, in this unfamiliar display of heart-sinking, Vera had revealed to me a great and most beautiful secret.

'I am very sure indeed, Vera,' I said, 'and you may be just as sure of me as I am of myself; I have swum right across the Kama many and many a time.'

'Go, then,' she said, 'go at once, and God be with you!'

In another moment I had lowered myself over the side and dropped quietly into the stream.

I did not attempt to cross in a straight line, but

allowed the current to carry me considerably downwards. The night was hot, and the touch of the cool water was delicious, and my spirits were high and buoyant as I struck out and sped gaily over the bosom of the friendly Kama. It was a long swim, and swimming seems twice as far when it is dark and the object towards which one is moving is invisible. Once or twice I could not help wondering whether I had not, somehow, swum round in a half-circle, or missed my way in some other manner, so long did the distance appear to me; but eventually my hands struck against reeds, and I knew that I had at length reached the shore or nearly so.

It was a matter of some difficulty to find the boat in the darkness, and I was almost despairing of ever succeeding in my search, when suddenly the moon came out, and by its light I soon saw the little craft nestling among the reeds. The same spell of moonlight showed me the galley floating like a black swan on the dancing silver-tipped wavelets, and I thought of Vera standing there, and waiting anxiously by the bulwark; and I hastened to get the boat off and row away to pick her up without further delay.

The moon retired once more into the seclusion of a scudding cloud, and I was obliged to steer by sound only, for I could no longer see the galley. The Cossacks on board, however, were still busy over their wine and their brawling, and there was plenty of noise to guide myself by.

Softly and cautiously I plied my oars until I judged that I was about thirty or forty yards from the galley, and below it by the current of the river. Then I stopped and listened for a moment, and was in the act of pressing my lips to whistle out my prearranged signal to Vera, when unluckily the moon once again shouldered herself free of her cloud tormentors, and shone out fully and broadly over the water, in such a manner that my boat and I lay in the full pathway of her bright beams.

At the same instant some one cried '*Karaool!* who goes there?' I gave no reply, but hid myself as much as possible by bending my head and subsiding into the bottom of the boat.

One of the drunken sentries then fired a shot, which went I know not whither; it did not strike me or the boat.

Nevertheless, I thought, if it was to be a matter of shooting and perhaps pursuing, I would rather be out of the boat than in it, and I lost no time in slipping once more into the water. They would never see my head in the moonlight, I knew, especially if I dived occasionally beneath the surface.

There was a boat continually floating by the side of the galley, with a man always in it, and into this boat I saw several men now scramble and start in pursuit of my own craft. This was propitious for my purpose, which was to return at once and unperceived to the galley; and in another moment or two I

had safely covered the distance that lay between me and the large vessel, and was scrambling up the side.

I found the deck nearly deserted—a few men standing in a group in the bows looking eagerly after the boat which had started in pursuit of me. Most of the crew had staggered away to sleep, and the rest were with Yermak ashore, or else joining in the pursuit of my unworthy self. But I soon discovered Vera leaning over the side, and straining her eyes in the direction in which lay the two boats, though there was nothing now to be seen, for the moon had disappeared and left a dark world behind her. To my surprise, my princess was in tears. I touched her arm, and Vera started round.

She gazed at me for an instant as though I were a ghost. Then she suddenly seized me in her arms with a cry of joy, clasping her hands tightly about my neck and kissing me repeatedly, wet and dripping as I was. I was amazed at this demonstration, which was unlike Vera, and unexpected ; but the amazement was a pleasurable sentiment.

‘I thought they had shot you, and that I should never see you again,’ she said. ‘Oh, Sasha, what should I have done then ?’

I had not sense enough to say anything, but I had enough to repay Vera’s caresses with interest.

‘And you came back, though you might have escaped,’ she added ; ‘it would have been easy for you

to swim ashore instead of returning for me ; but perhaps you are weary ? '

' Not an atom,' I said, truthfully enough.

' Then let us swim together—oh, do let us ! ' she entreated.

I shook my head. ' It is too dangerous, Vera,' I said, ' now that they are on the alert ; and the moon is in a fickle mood ; and the swim is a long one, longer than I thought.' Vera stamped her foot angrily.

' Say at once that you are afraid,' she said.

' Very well, then, I am afraid,' I said.

' Then you are a coward, and I hate cowards,' she hissed, ' and—and I wish I had not kissed you just now ; I meant nothing by it ! '

I had no reply ready and remained silent.

' And now, since you refuse to accompany me, I am going to swim alone,' continued Vera.

' You shall not,' I said.

' And why not ? ' she said haughtily.

' Because I forbid you and shall not allow it,' I said. I knew very well that a display of masterfulness would satisfy Vera better than anything else in her then mood, and it did. She said nothing, but leaned and stared at the water silently, I standing as silently at her side. Presently she took my hand and kissed it, and retired into the pavilion.

And I, foolish lad that I was, felt a glow of gratified vanity and happiness because I knew that I

had made a conquest of this queenly maiden of fifteen summers, and that henceforward she was my own, body, soul and spirit.

The next day Yermak returned, not in the best of humours. He had interviewed my uncle, and brought back a low opinion of my commercial-minded relative. I fancy the latter had threatened and lectured the Cossack brigand, making it clear to him that he thought ill of his nefarious calling; and it is certain that he would not listen to Yermak's outrageous demands for my ransom. According to Yermak's version of my uncle's remarks, he is supposed to have said that if Yermak took me and kept me altogether, it would be no great loss to the family, whereas I might be an acquisition to the brigand troop; but that, since I was the son of his elder brother, he supposed he must make some kind of offer for my liberty, and the offer—according to Yermak—was a very inadequate one indeed.

I have said that Yermak returned in bad humour, and on this first evening after his journey to Perm he took occasion to show that, though by nature a kind-hearted and agreeable man, he was capable of displaying at times great anger and ferocity, if irritated by those in his service. When he heard of the drunkenness and brawling of his men in his absence, of which I conclude he learned from his wife, he flew forthwith into a fit of passion, and severely punished several of the offenders, and especially one named

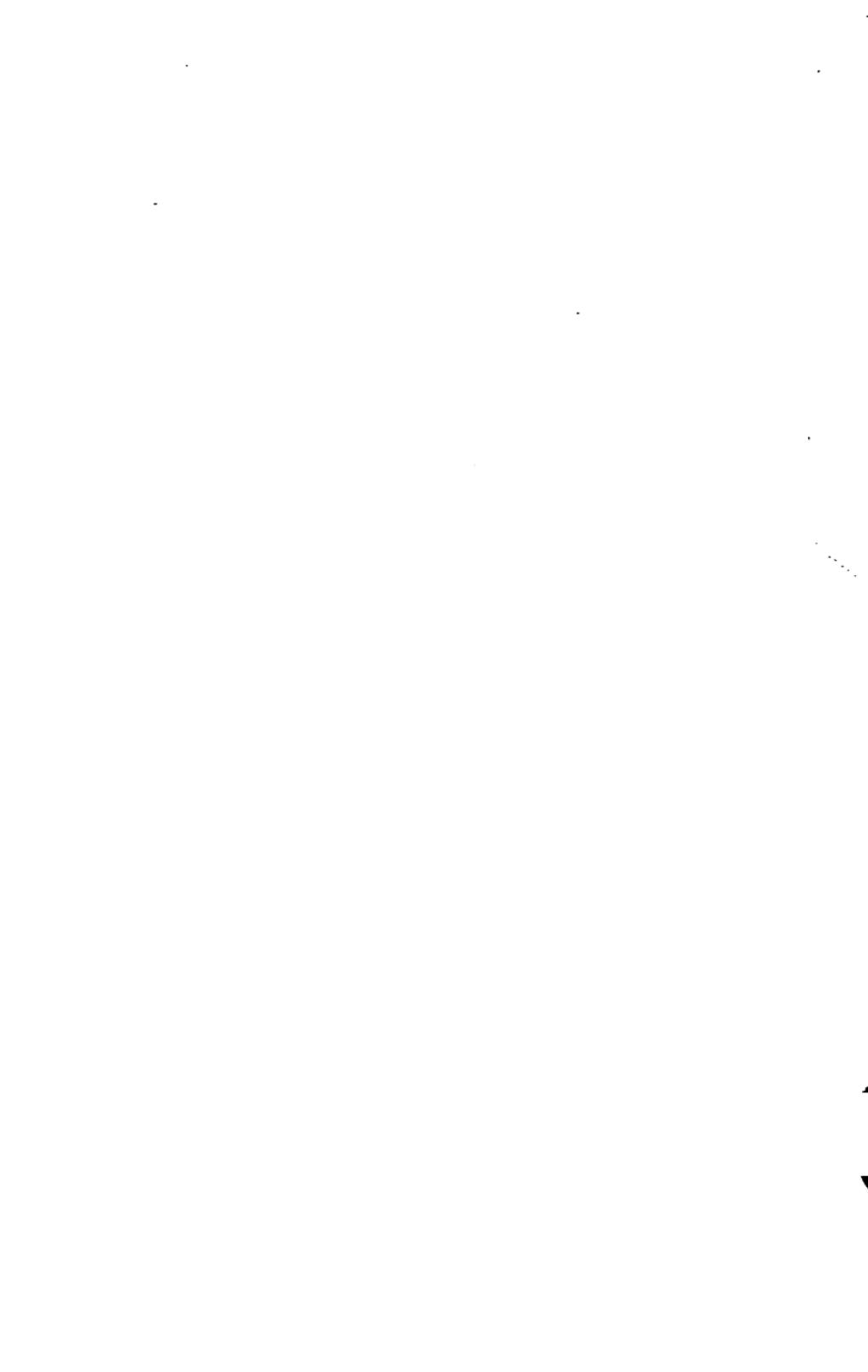
Hassan, whom he flogged savagely with the knoot, wielding that barbarous instrument with his own hand, and causing poor Hassan to retire blubbering and bleeding to the hold, where the men slept as best they could among the casks and lumber with which it was filled. It was not a pleasant sight to see the knoot laid on by Yermak's strong arm, and seeing the evil mood which possessed the chieftain on this day of his return, I was glad indeed that he had not been informed of my attempted escape, of which, as a matter of fact, no one knew except Vera ; unless, indeed, it was Yermak's beautiful and gentle wife, who certainly observed my dripping garments and must have formed some opinion as to the cause of my evident dampness ; but who, if she guessed it, did not betray me.

CHAPTER VIII

FREEDOM

AND now happened a very small matter, from which proceeded great results. It is wonderful from how tiny a spark, sometimes, the most all-consuming conflagration will originate—smouldering, perhaps, hidden and unnoticed for a long while ere it bursts out in all its splendour and might.

On the morning after Yermak's return I was on deck early while the chief still slept, for I could not rest by reason of the excitement of the previous evening. The sun was up and the morning lovely, and the Kama looked most inviting for a swim—her wavelets dancing and bobbing bewitchingly in the sun's rays. Little Aleena, Yermak's tiny daughter, commonly called Aleenooshka, was playing about outside the pavilion within which her parents still reposed. I played with the child for awhile until I tired of it, after which I lay down to rest and dream until Vera should appear to relieve my dulness; for it had come to this, that until Vera appeared, day did not begin, for me!





He swung her high in the air

The child Aleenooshka continued to play about the deserted deck, and I, perhaps, fell asleep behind the chest against which I lay. Suddenly I was aroused by a scream from Aleenooshka, and then I saw a sight which froze my blood for a moment and prevented me from moving a finger.

I saw Hassan scrambling out of the hold, looking like a devil, with his eyes fixed upon the little one, who recoiled in terror from him. In one moment he had seized her, and placing one hand upon her mouth to stifle any sound she might make, he swung her high in the air and launched her out into mid-stream, where she struck the water with a splash and disappeared.

If Aleenooshka had been the most worthless of puppies, I should have made this incident an excuse for a plunge into my beloved Kama and a pleasant morning swim ; it was no displeasing or dangerous task for me to swim after her, and consequently no credit to me ; therefore it is not for the pleasure of sounding my own praises that I record my action. All that I did was to plunge head first from the galley, strike out for the spot where one little arm had reappeared, as though in piteous entreaty for aid, seize the child and carry her back spluttering and screaming to the barge—and yet this little action on my part was, under Providence, the primary cause of the acquisition to Russia of the whole of Siberia.

How this great result proceeded from so slight a

cause it will be my task to show in the course of these records.

But the first link in the chain which connects the great event with the small lay in the deep gratitude which Yermak undoubtedly felt for the service I had rendered him in saving his little one from death. He embraced me and wept over his child and over me —she was none the worse for her ducking, though Hassan's cruel hands left bruise-marks upon her delicate throat and limbs for some time after—and finally he solemnly vowed by all the Christian Saints as well as by Mahomet that there was nothing in this world that he would not give or do for me, either now or at any future time, presenting me with a ring from his finger in token of his promises, and both Vera and me with our freedom as an earnest of the sincerity of the same.

As for Hassan, he had taken the opportunity of the agitation prevailing during those moments when Aleenooshka was restored to her mother's arms, and Yermak with all his men had crowded around her and around me, to drop quietly into the water and swim away to the shore. By the time that Yermak had had leisure to learn of his villany, he was observed wading out of the reeds half a mile away, and in another moment had disappeared in the forest ; and though Yermak, in his fury and vengeful passion, sent armed men to overtake and cut him in pieces, the party returned without having caught the miscreant.

And so Vera and I found ourselves at liberty to depart after a term of captivity lasting for a little over a week; and depart we did after many cordial expressions of gratitude from Yermak, who escorted us part of the way homewards. When he took his leave of us he repeated his promise to stand my friend in small things or great, whenever called upon by me to do so; and though at the time I thought little of his promise—for how, I reflected, was this brigand chief to be of any service to a Stroganof, excepting in so far as to exempt his lands and possessions from pillage?—yet now, in my age, I am ready and happy to acknowledge that this great man has found opportunity to redeem his pledge in a manner undreamed of—grandly, imperially, magnificently; having rendered such services, through me and mine, to my beloved master as must for ever dwarf the achievements of future pioneers of Russian greatness; unless, indeed, in future ages there rise up a second Yermak as well as a second Siberia to be conquered—the former of which contingencies is perhaps as improbable as the latter.

My interview with my uncle was amusing, because he was still under the impression that a huge sum of money was payable for my release, and his relief of mind to hear that this obligation had been remitted was quite comical. My brothers were glad to see me safely restored to freedom and the comforts of home, though it had not occurred either to them or to my

uncle to attempt my release by force of arms. Serfs had, indeed, been sent to scour the woods and river banks for me, and some of these had brought in news of the dreaded presence of Yermak's pirate-galleys ; but with this discovery the search for me had ended, since war and violence were strangers to the very imagination of my commercial relatives, and they would have as soon thought of organising a campaign against the moon as of risking their skins in an attack upon Yermak. Still, they were honestly glad to see me, and glad, too, to hear that I had had the good fortune to gain the friendship of the great Cossack brigand ; for our home and our possessions were now safe from molestation, at all events : 'and who knows,' added my uncle, 'if the Grand Duke keeps his promise, now that Shuisky is dead, and empowers me to develop the Stroganof estate on the other side of the Urals, this Yermak may be made of some use yet, Sasha ! I may yet employ both you and him in an enterprise that would, I think, be more agreeable to you than staying at home.'

I only laughed at my uncle's prophetic utterance, thinking no more of it than this : that my good relative little guessed how strong a reason I had at present for preferring to stay at home and within touch of Molebsk ; for the prophecy stirred no answering wave of prevision in my heart ; and, if the truth be known, I do not think that at this time I either expected or desired ever to see my friend Yermak again, or to

call upon him to fulfil what I regarded as an empty and valueless promise, made in the heat and flush of gratitude.

One little circumstance surprised me on my return home from captivity. I had looked upon old Daniel, my splendid Cossack pony, as lost. He had been led away when we were both captured, and taken I knew not whither, but probably herded with the rest of Yermak's ill-gotten flocks and droves. Yet one of the first objects my eyes rested upon on visiting the yard at home after my return, was old Daniel himself, large as life, and as pleased to see me as I was to see him. He came bucketting up to me, and laid his nose in my hand, very happy to behold his lost master ; but, unfortunately, speech was just the one and only accomplishment Daniel could never quite acquire, and therefore I do not know the exact process by which Daniel ridded himself of his captors and returned home ; these things are wrapped for ever in the darkness of the impenetrable. But Daniel probably waited, I should say, until some stranger tried to ride him, and then removed that stranger in one of several ways Daniel knew of—hung him up on the bough of a tree, perhaps, or shot him suddenly into the Kama—and went home.

Yermak and his galleys disappeared shortly afterwards ; having nothing to gain in our part of the world, where we and the Krilofs were the only families seriously worth plundering, it was useless for them to stay

here ; and I saw no more of Yermak for two or three years, though I continued to wear the ring he gave me, which was a valuable trinket, beside serving to remind me of an entertaining adventure. During those two or three years my intimacy with my princess ripened and developed. We quarrelled occasionally, but our devotion to one another was very great, nevertheless, and we never fell out for long. My quarrels with her brothers were still more frequent, and with them I came many times to blows. There was spirit in these Krilosfs, and it was a pleasure to fight with them, because I knew that even if worsted, they would still be ready to try conclusions the next time we happened to meet. They were against my intimacy with Vera, but not, as they themselves informed me, on personal grounds. My fault lay in being a Stroganof, and though I did my best on every possible occasion to prove to them that the Stroganofs were better men than the Krilosfs (though sometimes I was worsted), I could never convince them of the fact.

Needless to say, their opposition had not the slightest effect upon either Vera or myself. I am not modest enough to pretend that my own attractions were not the principal rock upon which was built the edifice of Vera's love for me ; but I firmly believe that even if this had not been the case, and if I had nevertheless courted her in despite of her brothers, their opposition would have sufficed to throw her into my arms ; for Vera possessed all the combative spirit of

her brothers, tenfold more intensified than theirs—a very splendid spirit was that of my princess, and her courage surpassed the courage of women, though her womanly tenderness, at opportunity, yielded not an atom to the gentlest of them.

And so, in opposition, and in spite of opposition, our affection grew and developed during those two years, while I, and she also, passed from our fifteenth to our seventeenth summers ; and in that time my body found occasion to enlarge itself in such a manner that at the end of the thirty months I was, to all appearances, a full-grown man, and large at that—not so very tall, but broad and very strong in the limb and muscle ; and as for Vera, assuredly never maiden breathed more beautiful or more haughty than my princess, nor yet more bewitching. And then, at the end of that period, there came to us at Perm whispers from Moscow of strange doings at Court—indications that the young eagle Ivan was fluttering his wings and growing restless ; hints that he was showing character, and had startled continually his advisers, with new and immense schemes and projects of aggrandisement and ambition. We were to have, rumour said, a great king over us, who should rule us with a rod of iron, and live to be the terror of the enemies of Russia, and of Europe generally.

He had already laid claim to and adopted the title of Cæsar or Tsar, to which he declared himself entitled (as descended, on the mother's side, from the

Emperors of the Byzantine line), and was now no longer to be known as Grand Duke of Moscow, but as Tsar of Russia, a determination which pleased all classes of the community, priests, boyars, and people.

Then followed more news—news which did not at first greatly interest us, not specially so, I mean, though afterwards it proved of the greatest moment to us and pregnant with immense consequences. The young Tsar, who was about my age, scarcely seventeen, expressed his intention of being married. He thought, the proclamation ran, of taking a wife from one of the European Courts, and would look about him for a suitable consort. But presently news came of a second proclamation, to the effect that Ivan had reconsidered the matter of his marriage, and that, rather than risk uniting himself with a princess who spoke in a different tongue, and worshipped God in a different manner from his own—for quarrels and bickerings were certain to result from such a marriage, and possible trouble to the realm—he had determined to seek a wife from among the daughters of his own boyars, who, he doubted not, were to the full as beautiful and as charming as the fairest of foreign princesses. And then Vera and I laughingly wondered who would be the fortunate *boyarishnya* among the acquaintances of the young Tsar.

‘Probably he is in love already,’ said Vera, ‘and

that is why the foreign princesses are to be disappointed after all !'

'One would think he had seen *you*, that he issued the second proclamation,' I said laughingly.
'It's a good thing he has not, Vera !'

'No such luck for me !' said Vera, saucily, and laughed too.

But on the next day I received a message from Vera to ride over and see her at once, upon a most important matter, and from the receipt of that message my life-troubles began.

CHAPTER IX

AN IMPERIAL PROCLAMATION

I RODE straight to Molebsk, the winter residence of the Krilofs, for it was now the cold season; and though the distance is at least eighty miles, old Daniel accomplished the journey easily in a day. I demanded admittance boldly at the front entrance to the Krilof mansion; for it had come to this, that the young Krilofs had given up as a hopeless task the attempt to keep me away, for I persisted in coming when I pleased in spite of their opposition.

Vera received me joyfully, but I could see that something had occurred to agitate her, and I bade her tell me immediately what had happened. I imagined she would tell me of some more than usually violent quarrel with her brothers about myself, and was prepared, at a word from her, to go in search of those young men and bring them to reason, one by one, with my riding-whip; for by this time I had far outgrown them all in strength, and could do as I liked with the pugnacious but insignificant weaklings.

But Vera had a different kind of communication to make.

'It is this marriage of the young Tsar's!' she said.

I burst out laughing.

'But surely Vera you have not sent for me to talk over the Tsar's affairs!' I cried. 'If so, this is a compliment indeed, my soul; since you must have longed much to see me to have sent for me upon so flimsy a pretext!'

'I am always longing to see you,' said Vera, simply; 'what else have I in life? But it seems I shall not see you, my Sasha, for many months after this day.'

Then my laughter died out, and I was serious enough as I asked the girl what she meant.

'Read this!' she said, and handed me a document. This was a copy of a proclamation, the third within a few months or weeks from his Highness the Tsar, and set forth that in view of his approaching marriage, Ivan now called upon his faithful boyars in every quarter of his dominions to send their marriageable daughters to the nearest centre, in order that his Majesty's committee of selection might choose out those worthy of being sent to Moscow for the personal inspection and final selection of the Imperial Bridegroom himself.

A list was appended, containing the names of all those boyars who lived in our district, with the information that the centre to which their daughters should be sent by a given date was Viatka, a large town on

the river of the same name, which is a confluent of our own Kama.

Then followed a recital of the pains and penalties which would result if any boyar should presume to run counter to the expressed will of the Tsar by withholding, for any cause, his daughter from the preliminary inspection and census to take place in the various central towns specified.

When I had spelled out this document, I was inclined, at the first impression, to pass the matter off with a laugh; but on consideration it appeared to me that, willing as I might be to risk the displeasure of the sovereign on my own account (for I was personally acquainted with Ivan, as has been shown, and flattered myself that much would be tolerated and forgiven in me which might seriously exasperate in others), yet it would not be well to subject Vera to the Tsar's passion. I suppose my thoughts reflected themselves in my face, for Vera said, when I had finished reading: 'I see you consider this very serious, and so do I. Of course I shall have to go to Viatka.'

'I must think it over,' I said hoarsely; 'Viatka would be bad enough; but of course the committee will send you on to Moscow——'

'It may not come to that!' said Vera.

'Of course they will,' I replied; 'look in your glass.' Vera blushed and said nothing.

'And supposing you went to Moscow, and the Tsar chose you—what then?' I continued.

'Oh, I had not even contemplated that!' said Vera. 'I was only thinking of the long journeys and delays—and—and—our separation.'

'That would be bad, but the other would be worse,' I said.

'Why so?' she asked, as though surprised.

'Because if Ivan chose you from among them all—of which there would be great danger—our separation would be for ever.'

'Again, why so?' she said, frowning and looking her haughtiest.

'The Tsar's word is the law,' I explained. 'No maiden could or would refuse to obey him in such a matter.'

'Then let me tell you,' said Vera, flashing her eyes, and looking like a Queen (I could not help thinking what a splendid Tsaritsa she would make, if Ivan were indeed to choose her for his consort!), 'let me tell you that I shall marry whom I please, if I marry at all, though twenty thousand Grand Dukes and boy-Tsars bid me wed them.'

I took Vera's hand and endeavoured to soothe her, but she shook me off. Then an idea struck me.

'Vera,' I said, 'there is a way out of the difficulty, if we could only find it.'

'What is it?' she asked.

'We could be married at once, before the day you are due at Viatka.'

'Yes,' said Vera, simply; 'there is that way; I thought of it.'

My heart bounded with joy; good was about to come out of this threatened evil! But Vera somewhat damped my ecstasy.

'But neither your folk nor mine would hear of it,' she said; 'for besides all the reasons against it which have been advanced so often before, there is now this, that both families would certainly get into deep trouble.'

This was obviously true. The young Tsar's method of dealing with refractory boyars was notoriously drastic, and it would be dangerous in the last degree to incense him against the two families of Krilof and Stroganof by carrying off, in the very teeth of his *ookaz*, one of the fairest flowers of that garden in which he had signified his intention of culling a nosegay!

So that here was something in the nature of a deadlock; and when the time came for me to mount Daniel and ride away we had discerned no consoling solution of the problem. Nevertheless, I had agreed to put the matter before my uncle, while Vera had promised to do her best to persuade her brothers to allow of our immediate union. I parted from her with a heavy heart, for I had little hope of winning my uncle over to my side in this matter; he had, I knew, too much at stake in retaining the Tsar's favour; and as for Vera's brothers, were they likely to forego the chance of becoming brothers-in-law to the Head of the Realm for the pleasure of seeing Vera

united to a member of a family at feud, for ages, with their own ? From every point of view the case looked hopeless.

But though I had expected opposition from my uncle and brothers, I did not suppose the former would have displayed so much excitement as he did when I, somewhat tremblingly, approached him on the subject of my greatly-desired marriage with Vera. We had by this time received a similar copy of the proclamation, and I found my uncle deplored the fact that the only Stroganof maiden eligible as one of those who might be chosen was his own daughter, a very excellent and domestic creature, possessing every amiable quality, but no claim whatever to comeliness ; and whose chance of being chosen as Tsaritsa was consequently of the smallest.

‘ Ah, Sasha, my boy,’ he concluded, ‘ our chance is a poor one ; and yet only think what might have been if all the Stroganofs were as handsome as thou ! ’ It was a favourite delusion of my uncle’s that I was extremely handsome ; I was not handsomer than my neighbours, in reality, though Vera says to this day —but I was recording the conversation with my guardian : ‘ What of this Krilof girl, now, whom I believe you have seen ; she is said to be remarkable for personal comeliness ; is that so ? ’

‘ She is the most beautiful and queenly being that God’s sun ever shone on ! ’ said I, fervently.

‘ So ? ’ said my uncle, smiling at my enthusiasm ;

'then if the Tsar thinks as you do, we may expect to see a Krilof seated beside him as our sovereign; that would not be a pleasant upshot of the matter for us Stroganofs!'

'No, certainly not,' I assented with fervour; 'but there is little danger of that, for Princess Vera will never consent to marry the Tsar, whatever happens.' My uncle laughed aloud.

'What, refuse to be a Tsaritsa?' he said. 'No, Sasha, such things do not happen. What do you refer to—some love affair?'

'Yes,' I said stoutly, 'she has told me herself that she is in love.'

'Don't believe it, my son; don't believe it!' replied my uncle, with conviction. 'She may be in love, as you say; but let her taste the pride of being the one chosen maiden from among the rest of her sex; let her see the pomp and grandeur of the Court, and away will vanish all her calf-love for her little local boyar, whoever he may be.'

'All this might happen with others,' said I, 'but Vera is different from other women; as different as the sunshine is from the pine-torch.'

My uncle laughed again. 'You seem to know this maiden's mind very accurately,' he said; 'one would suppose you were the fortunate boyar whose attractions are to outweigh those of a throne!'

'I am he, uncle,' I said, blushing scarlet; 'Vera loves me. I will marry her immediately, if you permit

it ; she is willing, and that will settle the question of a Krilof Tsaritsa, which, as you say, would be an unpleasant outcome for us ! ' I jumped at this frail argument, it was the only one I knew of likely to serve me.

' And settle the fate of the Stroganof family, too, you young fool ! ' said my uncle, paling with anger or consternation—' and especially of the offending Stroganof ! Do you suppose that your action would escape observation, or that the Tsar would spare the boyar families that dared thus openly defy him ? '

' But the Tsar is not our owner, and we his slaves ! ' I said. ' We owe him our allegiance and pay him our tribute, but is he to tell us also whom we may marry and whom not ? I say that we are boyars, and nearly as good as he ! '

' At all events the first choice of wives is his ! ' said my uncle ; ' and, at all events, I forbid you to contemplate even for a moment the commission of this mad thing you speak of. Do you not understand that the fortunes of our house hang, at this moment, on the Tsar's favour ? Would you wreck our hopes at a blow, and destroy both present prosperity and future aggrandisement by a piece of insanity which you would regret for ever after ? If I thought there was danger of it, I would have you locked up until the choice of the Tsar is made ! ' I had never seen my uncle so moved before.

' At least you will allow me to escort Vera to

Viatka, and afterwards to Moscow,' I said, 'if I promise, whatever happens, to do nothing rash?'

'No, that I will not!' he said; 'you shall not go from here if word of mine can prevent it!'

But I would give no promise on this score, to the great displeasure of my uncle, from whom I parted on terms which were not of the most cordial.

So then I journeyed once more to Molebsk to see Vera, and tell her the result of my talk with my guardian. She had had no better success with her brothers—she had not expected it, nor had I. The Krilos were naturally anxious that Vera should take her chance with other maidens, and flattered themselves with great hopes as to her prospects and of their own consequent greatness in the near future. Before I parted with my princess that day, I solemnly promised, to her exceeding satisfaction and content, that whether on the journey to Viatka, or thence to Moscow, or whether in the capital itself, wherever she should be, I would never be far away from her, but always at hand—it might be under disguise, or possibly in my own likeness, to consult or to act as occasion demanded.

And, armed with what consolation we could glean from this arrangement, and fortified by renewed vows of unchangeable devotion to one another, we prepared to face the future and to fight out our destiny according as circumstances should array their forces against us.

My uncle kept a careful watch upon my movements. I learned afterwards that he had warned every priest within a radius of fifty miles of my intention to marry against my guardian's will; exhorting them one and all to refuse to perform the rite if applied to.

But chiefly at home at Perm was I watched and worried. Every serf and servant about the place appeared to have his orders to keep me in view and report any suspicious action on my part. It was exceedingly unpleasant. At last I received that which I was awaiting : a notification from Vera that on the following Monday she was to start for Viatka, under the care of her brother Andrey, and of an old family nurse—Tatyána. I received this communication secretly, by means previously discussed and agreed upon between us, so that no one about the house either observed or reported the receipt of Vera's message or my subsequent proceedings. Early on the following Monday morning I eluded the vigilance of my too solicitous friends, and, having secured what money I could, as well as a belt-full of pistols and other small arms, I mounted old Daniel and took my departure.

Where the road from Molebsk joined the direct road to Viatka, I took refuge from the cold and boisterous weather in the hut of a peasant, whence I could keep a watch upon all that passed without; and from my watching place I espied, an hour or two

later, a small cavalcade approaching. This was Krilof's three-horsed travelling carriage placed upon sledge-runners, and occupied by Vera and her brother and the nurse, followed by an ordinary rustic sledge drawn by two horses and containing servants, while a third vehicle was loaded with baggage and provisions.

I had left old Daniel to munch his oats in full view of any passers-by, because I knew that he would not escape my Vera's eyes—few things ever did!—and I desired her to know that I was at hand. That she did see Daniel, and also understood the meaning of his presence there, was made clear to me by the waving of a white handkerchief from the carriage window. Andrey, too, might have seen and recognised Daniel as easily as she, but Andrey was not sharp enough. Not that it would have made much difference if he had!

CHAPTER X

A BEAUTY SHOW

THE ride from Perm to Viatka is a long one, not much less than three hundred miles, and was not performed without adventure. There were wolves and robbers and 'mitails,' or blinding snowstorms, to contend with, and more than once was I of service in assisting the party out of difficulty and danger, and more than once was I amply rewarded by a kind and loving look from Vera's dark eyes and a loving whisper from her lips. Of course Andrey was soon aware of my presence or proximity, and, though he frowned savagely at me the first time that we actually met, and bade me beware how I played the fool in this matter—seeing that the journey was undertaken, as it were, by order of the Tsar—yet we did not come to actual quarrelling; for, as I explained to him, it would be the simplest thing in the world for me to carry off Vera at any moment if I desired to do so, and in the fact that I had not already done so was proof sufficient that she was safe. Andrey was sensible enough to see that this was true, and therefore—

though he would rather I had stayed away—he put up with my presence and company with the best grace he could assume ; and, indeed, I did not inflict myself upon him continuously, but only occasionally, for I rode in advance at times, and at others followed behind, forming a kind of scouting bodyguard to my princess.

And so Viatka was safely reached within the week, and well in advance of the appointed limit of time. And here we found the Tsar's commissioners already busy cataloguing the names of the boyars of the district, and the names and ages of their daughters.

The town was full of girls—young and old, fair and plain, merry and disconsolate. To judge from the number of young men present, there were also many of my sex situated very much as I was—that is, engaged or wishful to marry some of those who were compelled to submit themselves to the process of selection or rejection ; and, taking them one with another, I do not think I have ever seen a more melancholy-looking body of men. As was right and natural, each one doubtless thought his own charmer to be the most beautiful and the most attractive of all, and therefore the likeliest to be chosen by the young Tsar ; and this accounted for the melancholy looks of so many. Comparing Vera with all these others, I, too, felt mournful and despondent ; for, apart from prejudice and lover's blindness, there could be little doubt that my beautiful princess was as infinitely superior to the rest as the heavens are higher than

the earth. There was unspoken evidence of this in every glance of admiration lavished upon her as she walked out, and spoken testimony in plenty also, as I heard for myself many times.

‘There goes one that spoils our chance !’ one of a group of girls would say, as Vera passed, queenlike, down the road.

‘Devil take her, yes !’ said another. ‘What eyes ! It would console my poor Alexis to see her.’

‘Pavel, look there !’ another would say. ‘There walks a Tsaritsa born ! We are safe, my beloved !’

‘Yes, she is handsome,’ said Pavel, fervently, ‘and the stuff Tsaritsas are made of ; but——’ and the young lover plunged into love’s platitudes, and doubtless perjured himself by stating that, beautiful as yonder maiden was, she was not to be compared with his own Olga, or Doonya, or Marie, or Nadia.

Hour by hour the town filled with constantly arriving travelling carriages and sledges, each containing its cargo of blushing, tremulous, hopeful maidenhood, and its quota of fussy and agitated and anxious parents or guardians or old family nurses. Never, surely, was so much youth and beauty collected together into one town as was now to be seen in Viatka ; it was like a fair of the graces—blushes, and beauty, and laughter, and agitation, were everywhere.

Prince Mezetsky, president of the committee of three, was the object of every kind of flattery and adulation. Happy were those boyars who were

acquainted with him, and could therefore put in a word or two for themselves and their daughters. But, beyond specifying what were his particular instructions as to the qualities to be looked out for in the maidens to be selected in this preliminary competition, Mezetsky would not commit himself as to the chances of any girl concerning whose prospects he was interrogated.

'If,' he would say, 'she is healthy, of unstunted growth, of good colour, shapely of limb and comely of countenance, she will extend her journey to Moscow, and beyond this I can promise nothing.'

Vera possessed all these qualities, of course, and therefore I had no hope whatever that her journey would end at Viatka, and with it her danger of being selected for undesired greatness. She was certain to be among the hundred favoured (or unfortunate) of this centre to be reserved for the Tsar's own inspection.

There were some love-lorn girls who went about in tears, victims to the ambition of their parents, and being led like lambs to the slaughter. I think the most love-sick of these was little Princess Olga Hosinsky, of Nikolsk, in Vologda, the betrothed of my own cousin on the mother's side, Pavel Prohorof, whose estate lay near to her own. This Olga was a girl of spirit, though her tear-laden eyes and dejected looks at this time did not testify to her stoutness of heart. But her words were brave though her bearing was not, and I was present during a conversation which proved

to me that there were others who shared my Vera's views as to the advantages, or the reverse, of a seat upon the throne of Muscovy, if shared with young Ivan-Tsar. The talk was about Ivan's notorious savagery of disposition, and old Prince Hosinsky had used in vain every argument he could think of to gloss over the character of the young sovereign, and to paint in bright colours the magnificence and the splendour in store for her who should be chosen his bride.

'The Tsar shall never choose me,' she said, 'for I shall take good care to look my very worst on the day he first sees me. I shall fall and scratch my face, and wear an unbecoming dress; I would do anything to make him turn from me with loathing. I tell you again, I would not marry the little tyrant were he emperor of all Europe.'

'Ah, but you must be very careful, my soul,' said Pavel; 'for he has pity neither for man nor woman that offends him.'

Olga laughed: 'I shall not do anything rash,' she declared; 'but I shall look to you, my Pavel, to save me from wedding the little tiger, if a dowdy dress and a scratched nose are not enough to persuade him that I am not the loveliest of his subjects.'

'But have you no ambition to be Tsaritsa of Moscow, little soul?' asked Pavel, using the fondest expression in the Russian language. Olga placed her hand in his: 'I am only ambitious to be Tsaritsa

of your home and of your heart, my boyar ! she whispered. Whereupon Pavel vowed by all the Russian Saints, and especially by his own particular one, St. Paul, that the sanguinary little tyrant of Moscow should never possess his beloved Olga, even though he should choose her from among ten thousand to be his bride and empress. And so it happened that Olga set out with her father and mother for the building in which the first act of this imperial comedy was to be performed, greatly comforted by the words of her lover, and in no degree influenced by those of her father ; though some would say that these latter represented wisdom and the former foolishness. Yet there are those also who hold that the wisdom of loving and loyal hearts is the true wisdom, and that the wisdom of worldly ambition, and the desire for wealth and aggrandisement is the true foolishness, and of these latter am I who write.

The preliminary selection took place in a large granary, glorified now for the occasion, but used during the summer months in connection with the grain trade of the place, and here, at the appointed hour, were assembled the whole girl population of the district—all who could claim, that is, to have boyar blood running in their veins. For an hour before that chosen for the commencement of the proceedings, the large hall was filled with a crowd consisting of the fifteen hundred maidens, the competitors, together with their parents or guardians, or old nurses, and their

friends. The competitors themselves were all dressed in national costume, their hair being allowed to fall in a single thick plait down their backs ; the only essential difference in one costume from another lay in the magnificence or modesty of its adornment of pearls or other precious stones, and in the elaboration of the red and blue needlework that half covered the dress of each damsel. It was in vain that Olga had begged her parents to be allowed to don her most dowdy frock, and to leave at home all those strings of pearls and other gems which usually adorned her dress on special occasions. She had found that her father and mother, though kind parents to her, as a rule, were against her now in the matter upon which she had set her heart ; they were but human, after all, and the prospect of having their daughter chosen as the consort of the sovereign, with all the brilliant potentialities of power and emolument to themselves which such a contingency opened out, was a prospect a little too dazzling to be lightly ignored : ‘ Nay, Oliushka,’ the old prince had said, ‘ you shall wear your prettiest dress, little soul, and look your very sweetest—and who can look sweeter than our Oliushka ?—and if it please God and the holy saints to place you upon the throne of Russia, there is none in the realm who would better grace the position. And though I say it, little soul, your old father will make an extremely efficient Minister of State.’

‘ Yes, Oliushka, and there are better things in the

world than young love,' added the princess, her mother; 'I loved another when I was married to your father, but my parents were wiser than I, and knew well what was best for their child; just as we know what is best for you, little dove; so weep not, but obey, and put on your prettiest frock and the best pearl-strings, as you are bid.' Olga had not the slightest intention of weeping just now, for she had dried her tears since the moment when her mind was quite made up that, under no circumstances, would she permit herself to be chosen Tsaritsa against her will; but she obeyed, nevertheless, and did put on her smartest dress, as her parents desired. Pavel was among the crowd at the hall on this morning in December; but neither he nor any other person excepting the competing girls themselves were allowed to remain there during the actual business of selection. The hall was cleared, and the spectators informed that they might wait in the ante-rooms or outside in the street, or anywhere they pleased, and that those young ladies whose chances of selection did not survive the very first inspection of the ranks of beauty would soon follow their friends into the outer world. As for me, I joined my cousin Pavel, with whose anxieties I naturally felt, at this time, the greatest sympathy, and we comforted one another as best we could. Then the business began. Mezetsky and his fellows of the committee were seated, like judges, in a row, before a large table, each being provided with sheets of paper

and pen and ink. The competitors were then instructed to form themselves in line, and thus to advance one by one to the table, where they would be asked their names, and submitted the while to a casual inspection from the board of three. After the last should have visited the judges' table a list would be read out of the names of those who had failed to survive, so to speak, the preliminary examination, when these unfortunates would be requested to leave the hall and return to the consolations of their friends. This portion of the proceedings was put in hand at once, the girls advancing, a blushing tremulous line, to the table and giving in their names. The judges showed but little consideration for the feelings of their victims, making their remarks to one another as to the good looks or otherwise of the nervous young creatures who came to give in their names without the slightest reserve, and as though they were the appointed committee sitting in judgment upon a collection of pictures rather than upon the actual throbbing and tremulous tenements of passionately excited human hearts.

‘God of our fathers, what a frightful creature !’ Mezetsky would observe as some wretched lady of unattractive appearance took her turn at the table ; ‘you might have saved us a shock and yourself the trouble of a journey by remaining at home !’

‘Which of us are you looking at ?’ rudely added one of his fellow-judges ; ‘one of your eyes appears to be looking at me, and the other at Michael Ivanitch

here ! Many a victim burst into tears under such unfeeling criticism as this ; but some showed spirit, and gave the committee as good as they had received.

' Why could not the young Tsar send down an able-bodied committee instead of a set of blind and jibbering old fogies of a hundred years of age ? ' asked one, smarting under some unflattering observation of her judges ; ' how can you be expected to see clearly at the distance of the table-width ? Poor old gentlemen ; you had better send us all up to his Majesty, and give us and him a fair chance.'

' This isn't a bad-looking face,' would be the dictum as another lady appeared at the table ; ' but, Lord God, what a figure ! '

' Ah ! praise to the Highest !—here is a woman holds herself like a streletz ! ' said Mezetsky, as a fine tall girl, with a waxen Russian face and the wide and rather upturned nose admired in that country, advanced in conscious pride ; ' this one will get to Moscow without much doubt.'

' Here comes one who looks as though she were Tsaritsa already,' said Michael Ivanitch, indicating Olga Hosinsky, whose turn it was to approach.

' Pass on, sweetheart, thy chance is a rare one ! Remember me kindly if the Tsar choose thee for his bride ! ' said Mezetsky, kissing his hand ; ' and a pleasant journey to Moscow ! '

All this I heard from Vera and Olga, and from others besides ; for there were many tongues wagging

that day, and nothing that was said by the judges, either flattering or the reverse, was allowed to pass unremarked upon for lack of repetition.

As for my princess, what tongue, what pen could describe her loveliness and her supremacy on that morning? Her simple Russian national dress suited her perfectly; she looked what she was, a Queen—one of those intended by Nature to rule over the hearts of men; as superior to the fairest and stateliest of those other Viatka maidens as the Volga is to the Ufa. Even Olga, who was really a beautiful girl and held herself well besides, looked plain and insignificant beside my princess; and when it came to Vera's turn to pass before the three judges, those distinguished boyars made no attempt to disguise their admiration, but 'oh'd' and 'ah'd' in her face in a manner to make her flush with scorn and anger—in which state of mind, as I knew well, she was more beautiful, if possible, than ever; and ended by standing up, all three in a row, and bowing to the ground, greeting her as Tsaritsa, and closing their books as though there could be no further need of selection.

Vera came out of the hall very angry, taking no notice of the admiration and surprise her splendid appearance caused among those who awaited their friends without. She passed by her brother unheeding him; she took no notice of old Tatyána, who cried and wiped her eyes in her joy and pride; and she came!—oh, generous, kind, splendid princess—she

came straight to me and gave me her hand before all : 'Take me from this city of foolishness and vanity, Sasha,' she said, 'take me where I can breathe God's air and see the pines ; I am suffocated in this place !'

So my Queen and I rode forth into the woods and galloped our discontent away in our old familiar fashion ; and during the ride we renewed our vows that never, never should this flower be plucked from my bosom, not for all the ambition of all the Stroganofs and Krilofs, nor yet for the terror of the wrath of the young Tsar himself.

We agreed, moreover, that on arrival in Moscow I should appeal to the Tsar, on the plea of personal friendship, to exempt from candidature the maiden pledged to be my wife, mentioning no names and, if possible, without allowing Ivan to set eyes upon Vera ; for, as I said, 'If the young Tsar be allowed to see you, my soul, he will be more than human if he does not desire to better his intimacy with you !'

'Bah !' said Vera ; 'then, for Mercy's sake, keep me out of his sight !'

CHAPTER XI

BOYAR AND HIGHWAYMEN

FROM Viatka to Moscow is a long ride, and I shall not weary either myself or those of my descendants who may be destined to read these records by entering into detail as to our adventures during the weeks we occupied in travelling through that Volga-washed district. One adventure, however, I will put down as being somewhat entertaining and peculiar, and as an example of the kind of dangers and difficulties which constantly assailed us during that long journey.

Vera and I, having by this time quite made up our minds as to the proper course to be pursued on arrival in Moscow, felt somewhat more at our ease and happier and lighter of heart. Andrey Krilof, on the other hand, was more arrogant than ever by reason of the many and marked compliments and flattery paid to his sister at Viatka, and the consequent strengthening of his hopes with regard to her chances at Moscow.

He behaved as though he were already the brother-in-law of the Tsar, and treated his servants, and even

tried to treat me also, as the dust beneath his feet ; but it was never the way of the Stroganofs to submit to anything of this kind from prince or peasant or devil, and I place it upon record with satisfaction that Andrey Krilof received as good as he gave in all haughtiness and arrogance of deportment.

One day I happened to be riding a few miles behind the rest of the party. I had seen wolves about, and though my beloved Borka and Borza were not at hand to assist me—my sporting instincts were strong enough to cause me to abandon my place at the side of Vera's travelling sledge, and ride off into the forest in pursuit. This must not be considered an unloverlike or careless proceeding on my part, because it was partly for Vera's sake that I decided to chase those wolves ; for if I had allowed them to follow us stealthily unmolested, it was extremely likely that others would join them during the day, and that by the evening a pack large enough to be bold and therefore dangerous might have assembled on our flank. So I pursued those wolves, three or four of them, and old Daniel contrived to keep them in sight, in spite of the depth of the snow and the thickness of the covert through which we had to follow the animals. Occasionally I fired my pistols at the brutes, and I had wounded, I think, one of them when I found that my ammunition had completely run out, and that my pistols were no longer of any use to me. These weapons were somewhat new to me at the

time, and I have no doubt I burned the powder more wastefully than I should have done at a later period, when pistols had become a comparatively common arm.

Then I turned Daniel's head towards the road again, and we made the best of our way after the travelling party, whom I hoped to overtake in an hour or two.

I had ridden in pursuit of them several miles, when I heard the clattering of hoofs in front of me, and imagined that I had already overtaken the hindermost portion of the party, when to my surprise I found that this was not the case. Two strangers, mounted upon excellent Cossack horses something like my own, and heavily armed with pistols, axes, and knives, were cantering swiftly in front of me. I took them, at the first, for boyars, travelling like ourselves to Moscow ; but when they turned round and perceived me, I soon found that in this I was mistaken.

The instant the men saw me they pulled up and waited for me, drawing their pistols and levelling them at my head.

'Stop,' one cried, 'and explain who you are and where you are going to.'

'And who are you that ask ?' I said, casting about in my mind for a way out of this difficulty ; for when unloaded pistols encounter loaded ones there is certainly difficulty in the situation.

'Rulers of the road and tribute collectors, from

Kostroma to Susdal,' said one of the two, with inconceivable haughtiness.

'By what right rulers of the road?' I said, 'and on whose behalf tribute collectors?'

'By the right of might and our weapons,' said the fellow, 'and on whose behalf but our own—the Tsar's, think you? God is in heaven, my friend, and the Tsar is far away!'

'But I also have pistols, grand-dad,' I cried, seizing one and levelling it at him—I did not think it necessary to mention that it was unloaded—'and as for tribute, the Tsar shall have it, or none!'

'You are a brave boy,' said my interrogator. 'Put down that pistol, and we shall be the better friends; I admire spirit. Tell me first, do you belong to the rich party which is a few miles in advance of us?'

'On the contrary,' I said, an idea just coming into my head, 'in the contrary, I am hoping that before very long that same party, or rather the money and valuables they possess, may belong to me.' The two robbers looked at one another.

'Indeed!' they said. 'Whence come you, then? Not from these parts, that is certain, for here we rule supreme, and none dare interfere in our domains, from Susdal, as I say, to Kostroma.'

'I have followed them all the way from Viatka,' I said, without hesitation, 'watching my opportunity. They are a strong party.'

'So?' said my friend. 'And armed?'

'Heavily,' I replied. 'But I happen to have an understanding with the coachman of the prince's own travelling sledge, and also with one or two of the armed servants, and at a certain spot agreed upon there is to be an event.' The robbers glanced at one another once more, and held a whispered conversation. Presently the bigger of the two addressed me again :

'My friend and I are agreed,' he said, 'that with so great a prize at our very hands, it would be a pity to quarrel with one who appears to have an equal right with ourselves.'

'And who is well provided with pistols,' I added boldly, and laughing aloud.

'Two pistols are better than one,' he said.

'I shoot equally well with either hand,' I retorted, and covering both men as I spoke, each with a pistol. As a matter of fact, I do not think I had ever tried to shoot with my left hand; but the expedie was very successful.

'Stop!' said my friend, both men recoiling. 'It is better, as I say, to arrange such things amicably, especially when—as it appears—your plans have been already prepared, and therefore we propose a combination and an equal division. Our assistance will render your success certain. We should succeed without you; but we prefer to offer you one-third share of the booty, in consideration of the plan you have laid.'

After some show of reluctance, I accepted this

proposal, and proceeded to explain exactly where the robbery was to be effected. Now, as I was aware of the place at which the Krilofs had resolved to pass the night, I fixed upon a spot beyond this, in order to gain at least the hours of this night for the elaboration of my plan. The simplest thing would have been, no doubt, to fall upon these men—strike one down, and then attack the other ; but of course the danger of such a proceeding would be great, seeing that they were armed with pistols and I not, and the second man would in all probability shoot me dead while I was busy negotiating the first. Hence I was anxious, though, I think, no coward, to elaborate some plan by which I should save my own skin and make sure of theirs, and I fixed upon a place *beyond* that already agreed upon for the night-halt of the party in front of us.

We therefore followed at a discreet distance, not showing ourselves to the travellers, and when their resting-village was reached, we skirted the place by striking into the forest and riding round it, coming out upon the high-road once more about two miles farther on. Here we found an outlying peasant's hut, the owner of which, on seeing my companions, instantly fell to vigorously crossing himself, praying and blubbering, and finally disappeared into the forest behind the hut, in the extremity of terror ; and from the conduct and aspect of the man I rightly inferred that he was acquainted with the persons into whose society destiny had brought me.

I hoped by remaining awake while these men slept to secure at least one of them alive, in which case I should have cared nothing for his fellow single-handed. But in this I was disappointed, for neither one nor the other, it appeared, had any intention to retire to rest. Unfortunately a bottle of vodka, which is the favourite drink of the peasants, was found by them, and this kept them awake and employed. They produced cards, also, and played together, drinking and quarrelling, until their disagreements became so acute that I had great hopes they would relieve me of further embarrassment by cutting one another's throats.

This desirable termination to their game was not arrived at, however; though, when the stormy play ceased, my opportunity came. One of the fellows being half drunk, complained of the heat and left the hut to cool himself in the outer air—the atmosphere within being in very truth of the most stifling, owing to the smallness of the room and the largeness of the stove.

'Now,' thought I, 'is my chance,' and I was about to spring upon my friend and account for him, when he saw my movement and divined my purpose, and before I could stir a finger he had snapped a pistol at my head—the shot flying wide.

I drew my own weapon, but laughed unconcernedly.

'That was an unfriendly act,' I said; 'what made

you shoot at me, friend ?' The fellow affected to make a joke of the matter, as I did

'I thought it had suddenly struck you that the booty would divide better into two than three !' he said. His remark gave me an idea.

'You were wrong there,' I replied. 'I had not thought of it; but since you suggest it, and since your companion appears to be a poor-spirited kind of a fellow, what say you to making such a division as you suggest—instead of three parts, two parts ? There is a lot of money, I can tell you ; half of it would make a man rich for a year !'

The fellow's face instantly assumed a sly and avaricious expression ; I longed to jump upon him and strangle him, but I saw that my present plan would work : his countenance promised me this much, therefore I kept my hands off him and adhered to the safe game.

'Vainka is a fool,' he said, 'and a coward, too ; I have long desired a better partner, and this, I think, I have found in yourself. Will you shoot him or I ?'

'Neither,' I said, 'but we will together fall upon him and bind him as he enters the hut, and to-morrow we will leave him here, bound, for the peasant to find ; probably the peasant will knock him on the head with his axe, which will spare us so much blood-guilt ; there is a special curse against the murder of an associate. I prefer to leave him to the peasant ; if you prefer to shoot him for yourself, then shoot him !'

My friend spat on the ground and then crossed himself, glancing up at the sacred picture in the corner of the room as he did so.

'Save us from special curses,' he said; 'have it your way.'

There was a set of driving-reins lying on the bench by the stove, and the fellow cut this in two as he spoke. He made a running noose of one rope, I did the same with the other, though I could scarcely work for suppressed laughter; it seemed so droll to me that this rascal was about to tie up his comrade at my bidding and for my benefit.

'You pin him as he enters the room,' he said, 'and I will bind his arms; hold him tight, he is as slippery as an eel!' I promised to be careful; I promised myself, moreover, that if once I had my arms around the fellow he should not escape me. Then I took my stand at the door, and very soon the victim came staggering in.

I performed my share of the business very successfully, in spite of much struggling and kicking and terrible swearing; while Matyan—my fellow-conspirator—did his part in securing the man's arms and legs with the rope. Then we placed him upon the floor by the stove, having first gagged him; and half my work was accomplished. With his companion I had little difficulty, for he did not seem to suspect me after our joint treachery upon his partner, and I easily found an opportunity to spring upon him before he

could seize his pistols, and after a brief struggle I not only had him down upon the ground, but also securely tied up like his fellow. Then I removed the gag of this latter, in order that the two might enjoy the comfort, during the rest of the night, of mutual recrimination ; after which I cordially thanked my friend Matyan for his assistance in securing Vainka, and having informed them that my pistols were unfortunately unloaded and therefore useless, or time might have been saved at the beginning of our acquaintance, I wished them a good night and rode back to the village, where my company were still at supper. Here, also, I found the peasant, the proprietor of the hut in which I had left my two friends, busily repeating, with many lamentations, the tale of our arrival and of our threats and terrible appearance. He was entreating Andrey Krilof to arm his servants and go forth to secure the robbers while they slept, for, he declared, if not attacked to-night, they would certainly themselves attack on the morrow. On seeing me, this worthy serf fell into violent hysterics and was with difficulty appeased, but eventually, hearing that both of the real miscreants were securely bound, he hastened away to vent his wrath upon them, armed with a stout driving-whip.

‘They have turned me out of my hut many a cold night,’ he cried, ‘and stolen my vodka and provisions —devil take his own—and to-night I am going to square the account !’

'Don't murder them with the axe, grand-dad !'
I cried after him.

'Not I,' said he; 'I am no shedder of blood—God's curse is upon such ! But the Scripture has nothing against the using of whips !' And of his rights with regard to whipping, this good man made, I believe, the very fullest use that night ; for when we drove up to the hut on the following morning in order to pick up my prisoners and carry them off to the nearest selo (head village), we found those two formidable persons reduced, through much flogging, to the saddest condition of piteous helplessness ; while our sturdy serf was quite tired out with his exertions. He returned the whip with thanks for its use, remarking that there must be great virtue in flogging, since assuredly these two ruffians had never prayed so much in all their lives as they had done on this night.

CHAPTER XII

A WOLF-PACK

I HAVE mentioned that wolves had begun to show themselves in some numbers ; the weather at this time was very cold and severe, and, doubtless, the famishing animals were rendered bold by starvation, as they invariably are ; indeed, I have never before or since seen a pack of wolves either so numerous or so formidable as that which suddenly assailed us on the morning following my adventure with the road-robbers.

We had called, as we passed, at the peasant's hut in order to pick up these two amiable persons ; for it was our intention to carry them with us as far as Susdal, there to deliver them into the hands of justice ; and when we had secured them and packed them safely in the last sledge—that which contained the chests and parcels in which were stored Vera's wardrobe and other properties—we continued our journey through the forest.

Once or twice I noticed during the morning that there were wolves about, for occasionally my practised hunter's eye would catch sight for an instant of the

grey, skulking form and sharp snout of one of these cunning creatures, gliding noiselessly through the trees on our flank ; but throughout the early part of the day the wolves were mere units, and as such gave me no alarm for the safety of the party, for I knew well that there is only danger to be apprehended from these formidable but cautious animals when their own large numbers inspire them with courage to attack. A few wolves are no more to be feared than as many foxes ; a large company of wolves is one of the most dangerous and awe-inspiring things that the mind of man can contemplate.

There had been a snow-fall during the night, and we had sent forward the two pair-horsed *Kibitka*-sledges in order to make a road for that of Vera and her brother, with whom was also old Tatyána the nurse, which thus travelled last of the three. Needless to say, I was mounted upon old Daniel as usual, and rode close to Vera's sledge, as I often did, conversing with her or with the others as we went.

'There are wolves about this morning, Sasha !' said Vera ; 'I have seen several.' Old Tatyána crossed herself devoutly.

'God save us from them,' she said ; 'where are they, boyar ? I never saw one yet, though I have lived near upon seventy years.'

'You will see some to-day, Tatyána,' I cried, laughing ; 'for it begins to look as though we were to see more than we need this morning—look ! there

goes one—and there's another ! ' Sure enough, there were two visible together, cantering easily along through the trees on our right.

' Holy St. Vladimir, equal to the Apostles ! ' said Tatyána, devoutly, ' is there any danger from them, boyar ? '

' None at present,' I said ; ' those two grey fellows must multiply themselves by twenty before there is much danger from their cowardly kind. See, I will give those two a shot from my pistol, and you will probably see no more of them ! '

With the words I fired a shot.

At the unexpected sound, the three horses drawing the ponderous travelling carriage all started violently and shied to the left of the road. The sledge struck the root of a tree and tipped. Those within kept their seats with difficulty, but before the vehicle righted itself, Ivan the coachman lost his balance and fell off the box into the road, while the horses started at full speed after their companions, some hundred yards ahead, nearly overrunning old Daniel and me, who just managed to swerve out of their way. I saw Andrey Krilof cleverly secure the reins before they could get twisted and entangled among the scudding feet of the horses, and seeing that the party in the sledge were therefore in no danger of being upset, I stopped Daniel in order to look after old Ivan's welfare, he having been sent spinning through the air into deep snow.

As I turned, I saw a sight which instantly revealed to me an, as yet, unguessed peril ; for I was just in time to perceive at least twenty wolves appear, mysteriously, from nowhere, fall upon poor Ivan in the twinkling of an eye, and tear him, in an instant of time, to pieces, snarling and fighting over the bleeding remains which had formed a living, breathing creature but a moment before, as though their claim to the food were unquestionable. It was not a pleasant sight. I was very young then and unaccustomed to scenes of bloodshed and horror, and the spectacle turned me sick for an instant. Nevertheless, I discharged a pistol into the midst of the group, and sent Daniel scudding, without a moment's delay, after the sledges, in order to warn my friends of the danger threatening us. For I knew now that we had a large pack to deal with, and that, having tasted blood, the savage brutes would thirst for more and would be rendered tenfold more formidable than before.

Away flew Daniel down the road. The good horse had seen the wolves, and knew just as well or better than I did that this was a serious matter, and not an ordinary wolf-hunt, with Borka and Borza at our flank and a couple or so of wolves scudding on in front ; but, if a wolf-hunt at all, a hunt with the wolves in the wrong position. Away flew Daniel, and as we started down the road I heard the wolves give tongue like so many grey death-hounds, as they too started in pursuit of us. Very soon I overtook the

sledge which bore my princess, and now I held a hurried consultation with Andrey and his sister. Vera looked a little white as she turned and saw the group of now noisy brutes close behind us, but she smiled reassuringly as she caught my eye, and said that she felt no fear. As for Tatyána, she was weeping and babbling a mixture of prayers and heathenish invocations to the *Liéshui*, or wood-spirits, crossing herself wildly and glancing frantically at the wolves every other moment. Andrey, like a sensible man, devoted all his energies to keeping his horses straight, for a mistake or a shy on the part of driver or horses respectively might, he knew, have fatal consequences. I easily kept up with Andrey's three flying horses, and so we galloped on for four or five miles, without much change in the position of affairs, excepting that the wolves gradually waxed bolder ; and whereas they had been content, at the first, to follow yelping and howling at our heels, a number of them now cantered alongside of us, at either side, and occasionally even darted towards the *prestyashki*, the two outer horses, as though intent upon pulling them down ; but up to now no wolf had actually dared to spring upon us, their hearts apparently always failing at the very last moment.

Nevertheless, they came nearer at each menace, and at last one actually had the audacity to spring up at old Daniel's throat.

Of course I was ready for him, and so was Daniel ;

my dagger sheathed itself in his neck, and as he fell howling to the rear, old Daniel very cleverly administered a kick which sent him flying among his companions and provided them with a ready-made dinner which submitted to be eaten without preliminary struggling.

This did not discourage the brutes, however; on the contrary, it appeared only to embolden them, and their attacks upon the two unshafted horses attached to the sledge became with every moment more serious, until at length those poor creatures lost heart and courage, and stumbled and panted, fighting bravely with tooth and hoof the while, and it became evident that before very long they must succumb to the attacks made upon them. I was able to protect the horse which happened to be on my side of the road by slashing with my drawn sword at those wolves which sprang continually at him to pull him down, and therefore when the climax came, it came in consequence of the fall of the other.

Quite suddenly the far-horse stumbled and fell, and was covered in an instant by a snarling crowd of his enemies. Fortunately in his fall he tore away the single halter which attached him to the front of the carriage, for these *prestyashki* are harnessed in this simple manner in rustic Russia, and therefore when he stumbled and fell, the big sledge merely bumped against him, and passed with a great jolt over two or three of those wolves which clung to him

—they howling with pain, but continuing to hold on to their victim—and proceeded onwards with two horses instead of three. But the moment had come to end this dangerous state of affairs. I drove Daniel through the thronging wolves to the side of the carriage, striking and stabbing at the brutes as I went; I leaned over and cried out—for the tumult of the howling wolves made it necessary at this time to shout aloud in order to be heard:

‘Come, Vera, Daniel shall carry us both; you, Andrey, mount the shafter as best you can, and let Tatyána scramble up behind you—then help me to cut the traces! ’

Andrey did not lose his head; there is good stuff in the Krilofs; he seized Tatyána and pushed her unceremoniously upon the shaft-horse, shouting in her ear to hold on for her life as best she could by mane, and rein, and ears. It was wonderful to see that old woman climb for her life, and grip and hold on like any urchin of twelve! Then Andrey leapt upon the shafter’s back behind her. Meanwhile, Vera had stood up at my bidding, and I took her by the waist in my left arm and hoisted her upon Daniel’s back, behind me. Several wolves sprang up and grabbed at her, but I lifted her so high that, save for a tear or two in the skirt of her dress, she seemed to have escaped their attacks altogether. Then Andrey and I hacked the shafter free of the carriage, and he sped out from between the shafts, with a neigh

of delight and relief, as though his double burden were the merest trifle in the world to him—which perhaps it was, for he was indeed a splendid horse, and second only to Daniel.

As for Daniel himself, he carried Vera and me as though there were no more weight on his back than a snail bears when he carries his shell ; and so, hacking, and stabbing, and lunging at our assailants—Vera doing her full share in the defence—we flew in pursuit of the rest of the party, followed by Andrey and the loudly-praying Tatyána.

As for the third horse, I had freed him with a cut of my sword ; but he used his freedom indiscreetly, for instead of accompanying us—when he might have saved his life as we did ours—he took a course of his own into the heart of the forest, pursued by a company of the wolves (of whom he thus relieved us), and without doubt he was eventually by them pulled down and devoured, far from all hope of succour ; we heard no more of him.

Freed of the heavy travelling carriage, we were now able to push along at a greatly-accelerated speed, and we soon overtook the two sledges, whose occupants were doing all they could do to whip and encourage their horses to increased exertions. Both pairs were travelling at full gallop, the drivers waving whips and shouting, and the servants and prisoners all bawling and praying together—creating such a din, as we

dashed past them, that it was impossible to gather a word of what was said.

There must have been half a hundred of wolves in pursuit of us by this time, and the terror of these poor people was natural and legitimate.

As for ourselves, however, we were no longer in great danger, for now that we had overtaken and passed the rest of the party, the wolves no longer harried us, but confined their attention to the sledges and their occupants, recognising that here was to be had a better chance of success, with less risk of getting themselves wounded by the swords and knives which Andrey and I, and also Vera, wielded with so much effect. So on flew old Daniel in comparative safety; and as for me, with my arm about my princess and her breath warm upon my neck, I felt that I could gladly ride on in this manner for a great many miles, and was inclined to be sorry when, half an hour later, the church and houses of Susdal appeared in sight.

‘Our ride is nearly over, Vera, my soul ! ’ I said ; ‘there is Susdal in the distance. Why are you pale ? ’ I added in some concern, noticing that my lovely companion drooped and looked white and worn. ‘ You are not frightened, Vera ? There is no longer danger, sweetheart ; be comforted ! ’

‘ I am not frightened,’ she replied, smiling ; ‘ dangers are no dangers with thee at hand, my Sasha ; but if I am pale I have a reason that you know not of ! ’

I concluded that the girl was weary, and said, 'Be comforted, for you shall rest in a few minutes ;' but before, almost, I had completed the sentence, Vera suddenly swayed and fell forwards, nearly slipping out of my arms to the ground, and I saw that she had fainted.

It was impossible to stop, for the sledges were still following us at full gallop, and I could hear from the variety of noises accompanying their advance that the wolves were still around them and in full attack. Therefore I firmly and tenderly took my princess to my heart, and abandoning the reins, allowed old Daniel to take his own way—which he could always be trusted to do with discretion ; and so we galloped together into the town of Susdal, I overwhelmed with surprise that my beautiful, brave Vera, whose spirit I had never before known to fail, should have so entirely succumbed now at the very moment of safety, and after having carried herself unflinchingly through the terrible dangers of the last hour. I had no idea of the real cause of her collapse, nor dreamed of the heroism with which she had supported an intolerable anguish so long as betrayal of her condition might have constituted a danger to her companions. But when I had carried her into the great room of the inn and laid her upon a divan, I found to my horror that Vera's skirt was all soaked with blood, and that one of her feet had been most terribly lacerated by the teeth of a thrice-accursed wolf. This had happened at the moment when I lifted her from the carriage to the

saddle ; but with extreme fortitude she had concealed from me all knowledge of the circumstance and of the agony she must have suffered by reason of it.

Almost immediately after our arrival the two sledges dashed up to the gate of the inn, the horses steaming and snorting ; the servants chattering and quaking, and crossing themselves in gratitude for their escape. I left Vera in charge of Tatyána, and went out to see whether all was well with men and horses. All appeared to be well, save for a few slight wounds about the necks and flanks of the panting steeds ; but I could see nothing of my prisoners, the robbers, Matyan and his companion.

I inquired for them. Gregory, the driver of the luggage sledge, in which they had been stowed, removed his fur cap and scratched his head.

‘The wolves nearly caught me, boyarin !’ he said.

‘Well,’ I replied, ‘what of that—where are the prisoners ?’

‘It was necessary to delay the wolves, your mercifulness !’ said Gregory. ‘It was necessary to give them something to keep them employed in order to get a good start of them.’ I began to have an inkling of the fellow’s meaning, and the thought ran cold to my heart.

‘Well,’ I said, ‘go on ; where are the prisoners ?’

‘Better an accursed robber caught in the act of devising a robbery and violence, than a good horse,’ faltered Gregory.



Threw them to the wolves to gain time

'Do you mean that you threw them to the wolves in order to gain time and thus escape yourself?' said I.

'One by one, your mercifulness, first the little one and then the big one; but for that the horses would have been pulled down, and I too should have been lost, as well as they! These malefactors must have died, you see, anyhow!'

Ah, well! it is good, after all, to reflect that Matyan and his partner were of some use to the community in their dying; they certainly never were in their living. And perhaps a single instant of anguish at the teeth of the wolves is better than the prolonged misery of the knoot, and this would certainly have been their fate at Susdal. Perhaps old Gregory was perfectly right, though his action seemed to me horrible and inhuman. As for me, I had Vera to think about, for though old Tatyána was a mistress in the art of healing by herbs and incantations, that torn foot of my beautiful princess did not yield at once to her ministrations, and we were obliged to rest for the greater part of a week in Susdal, during which time Vera suffered much pain, so much that my heart was embittered against the wolf tribe, and I vowed a terrible and implacable vengeance against them for ever, for this their sin; and I may here add that since that day I have never spared a wolf when I came across one.

CHAPTER XIII

THE TERRIBLE TSAR

Moscow was full and brimming over with the population that flocked to it from all parts when we at length arrived at the capital. We were among the late arrivals, for Perm is one of the most distant of all places in the empire; and it was well for us all that both the Krilofs and also the Stroganofs possess houses of our own in Moscow, otherwise we might have found difficulty in engaging accommodation suitable for our position. The scene in the streets of the city was very like that with which we had already become familiar in Viatka, only that the standard of beauty here was higher—since the hundreds of maidens perambulating the streets of Moscow represented those already selected in the various centres for their good appearance; while in Viatka, girls of every shade of beauty and ugliness were to be found, no classification having yet been made.

Assuredly I never should have supposed that so much loveliness existed in the whole world as was now assembled and at large in the capital of the Tsar;

and even the most beautiful now realised that her chances were not so great as she had hoped or supposed, or perhaps feared, if, like Olga Hosinsky and my own Vera, she happened to be in love with some meaner mortal, and had no ambition to be the chosen of the Tsar. It was still two or three days from the date appointed for the great selection, and I was anxious to obtain the ear of the Tsar in order to entreat him to have compassion upon me in so far as to exempt my princess from competition with her peers ; but, on the second day after our arrival in the city, ere yet I had succeeded in gaining an interview with his Majesty, as I walked with Andrey and his sister in the streets, I suddenly and unexpectedly encountered the Tsar.

The last two years or two years and a half, since the day we had parted, had wrought an immense change in my young master. I had left behind me a poor, ill-dressed, boyar-trodden child whose innate majesty showed through all the studied neglect of his up-bringing ; but I now saw before me the perfect realisation of very majesty itself. Ivan was walking with Vorontzoff, the young boyar on whose behalf he had defied Shuisky, and when his eye fell upon me he recognised me at once, and his face softened into a smile of welcome.

'See, Vorontzoff ! Who comes here ?' he said. Vorontzoff showed some signs of recognition, but was uncertain as to my identity.

'I seem to remember the face,' he said, 'but fail to attach a name to it!'

'It is Stroganof, Sasha Stroganof, one of my godfathers in good,' said the Tsar, 'one of those who opened my eyes for me and first taught me to discern good from evil!'

It was a kind and gracious speech, and I have never forgotten to be grateful to my master for it.

'Dost remember Adashef and my young rascals of footpads, Sasha?' he added, embracing me before all the people and laughing aloud, 'and the ducking thou gavest me in the Moskva? Upon my honour, that same ducking washed more of the devil out of me than you would easily believe!'

As for me, I stood speechless, foolishly gazing in admiration upon my young sovereign, who kindly patted my shoulder and laughed at my embarrassment.

'And who are your friends?' he said, regarding Andrey closely and Vera still more so. Then it suddenly struck me that this meeting was, after all, very unfortunate; for what if the Tsar were to take a first-sight liking to my beautiful princess? I suppose I grew suddenly pale, for the Tsar gazed curiously in my face and rallied me.

'What is it, man? I am not a ghost to be afraid of! One would suppose you had forgotten our ancient friendship and my claims upon you!' Then I found my tongue.

'No, indeed, Tsar Ivan Vasilitch !' I said ; 'and if I possess indeed a claim upon thy goodness, there is that I desire to ask of thee. May I come to-day or to-morrow in order to lay my petition at thy feet ?'

'Say it at once, man,' he said, 'say it at once ! I am one whose humour must be taken at the flood. I am in the best mood, being pleased to see thee, to-day ; to-morrow I may be a different man altogether, and disinclined to grant favours. But first, who are these ?'

'The Boyarin Andrey Krilof and his sister,' I said hesitatingly, while Krilof inclined his head with much dignity, and Vera blushed and bowed also.

'Oh, the Krilos !' said Ivan, scrutinising anew the faces of brother and sister, but lingering, I noticed, much longer when his eyes rested on Vera's beautiful features. 'And now, what of this petition ?'

'Pardon, sire !' I stammered, 'the boon I would ask of you is very private.'

'Oh, you need not mind Vorontzoff,' cried the Tsar, laughing ; 'and as for these others, they are your private friends—speak on, then ; the present time is your own.' I advanced close up to Ivan's side and whispered in his ear that I was in distress lest he should select for his bride one in whom my happiness was for ever centred. Ivan laughed.

'Is she beautiful ?' he asked aloud. My position was the most embarrassing that can be imagined.

'The lover must always reply "Yes" to such a

question !' I faltered. 'Other eyes might possibly judge differently !'

'There are some,' said Ivan, significantly, glancing at Vera as he spoke, 'there are some as to whose loveliness all eyes must judge alike. I do not ask of you names or descriptions ; but I will say this, that if I were to accede to such a petition as this from each boyar who is in love, then there would remain to the Tsar only unlovable maidens from among whom to make his choice ! It is impossible, as you must see, to promise anything in this matter ; but it would be hard indeed if, among nearly two thousand beautiful maidens, I should happen to choose that one in whom, as you say, your happiness is centred. Therefore, be comforted, and grudge not to the Tsar his free choice of a bride. It has ever been the privilege of the Russian sovereign to select his bride from among all, unreservedly ; you know this.' I knew it, of course.

'Then I will trust to your generosity, sire,' I said, 'to spare my ewe lamb !'

'Nay, not that !' he replied, 'not that ! Better not to tell me which is your ewe lamb, lest my attention be called to her by this ; but trust rather to the law of chances, which shows that I must first reject two thousand of the ewe lambs, as you call them, of others, before I select your ewe lamb !'

This was poor comfort, but as it was quite clear that Ivan intended to have his own way in this matter, I saw that it would be useless to reiterate my petition,

and that Vera and I must indeed depend upon the rulings of destiny, and, if matters went against us, trust to our own selves to set them right again.

'Is that all you have to ask of me?' asked Ivan, addressing me, but staring at Vera; 'ask anything you please, and come to me when you like—we are old friends, remember. Farewell for the present; farewell you also, my pretty one,' he added, kissing his hand to Vera, 'we shall meet, I dare say, you and I, the day after to-morrow!' Ivan glanced at me rather impatiently, I thought, and more lingeringly at Vera, and departed. He did not look at Krilof again.

Andrey laughed aloud as the Tsar disappeared.

'That was a sad misfire for you, Stroganof,' he said; 'but be comforted, for if the Tsar had granted your petition, I should have stepped forward and said that in this matter the lady concerned should in justice be consulted, and also her friends!'

Vera flashed a look of anger at her brother. 'Andrey,' she said scornfully, 'in order to be brother-in-law to this little tyrant, would gladly see his sister rendered miserable for life! My brothers are merchants like thine, Sasha; nevertheless, I know what I know.'

'And what is that, my sweet sister?' asked Andrey, still laughing, for he believed that he discerned victory already at hand, and his heart was light.

But Vera vouchsafed no reply whatever; and, as for me, all I could say was—for I could think of nothing

wiser at the moment—that I wished we were at Kamka instead of in the streets of Moscow; for then I should give myself the great satisfaction of chastising him as he deserved, whereas here I was obliged to put up with his foolery, though it sickened me.

‘Why so?’ he said; ‘fight me if you desire it, here; I am ready! Or come down, if you prefer it, to the banks of the Moskva, and have this matter out there!’ Andrey certainly had spirit; our fights always ended in the same way, yet he was ever ready for another. I think I accommodated him that afternoon, but I cannot remember with certainty. We were still boys in years, and boyish in our ways; and the fights were constant between us, and this is why I cannot be certain as to whether we fought that day or not.

But this I know, that whereas the Tsar Ivan had been, though firm, friendly disposed toward me on the first day, he was angry and unfriendly on the next, and stamped his foot when he saw me, and frowned, looking from me to Vera as though incensed to observe that I was again in the society of this beautiful maiden.

‘I have thought over that which you said to me yesterday, Stroganof,’ he said; ‘your petition is unpatriotic and disloyal.’ I coloured and bowed, but said nothing. Ivan stamped his foot again.

‘Well, have you no tongue?’ he said angrily.

‘You are Tsar and I am your boyar,’ I said, ‘and the Tsar’s word is the law; but if you desire to know

my opinion in this matter, I will be bold to tell it you, as I dared to speak up in another matter two years ago ; and it is that I like your treatment of your boyars and people no better now than I did then. Then you robbed them of their purses and property ; now you would rob them of their love and life-happiness.'

The Tsar raised his spiked staff with the old passionate gesture, but let it fall again without assaulting me.

'Stop,' he said, 'you are wrong. I rob no one. It is the recognised right and privilege of the Grand Dukes of Russia to choose for their brides the loveliest and the best. Do you grudge to your sovereign the exercise of his right ?'

'The Tsar should have the best,' I admitted, 'he should have that maiden who is most capable of making him happy and contented ; there are hundreds beautiful enough for this. But the Tsar must have other things besides beauty, such as the willingness of the maiden, without which all her loveliness would not avail to delight him. A weeping bride brings no content to the home !'

'She who is chosen to be the Tsaritsa sheds no tears !' said Ivan, flushing.

'There are those who would die rather than sit beside you upon the throne !' I said boldly, for I had worked myself up by this time to that pitch of recklessness that I cared not what I said. Also I happened to catch sight of Vera's face at the moment, and the

flash of approval she gave me would have carried me to any length of disloyalty and audacity.

'There you lie,' said Ivan, looking very pale, and his eyes assuming that bird-of-prey expression which I knew so well two years before.

'You lie,' he said, stamping his foot, 'there are none such ; if my boyars are traitors, the maidens know better what is due to their sovereign !'

'I am no liar,' I said, 'and no traitor ; and this you know, Ivan Vasilitch !'

For answer, the Tsar raised his spiked staff and banged it down on the ground, pinning my foot to the wooden side-pavement upon which we stood. I do not think that I flinched ; Vera did not know that I was touched, as I afterwards discovered, but the Tsar did. I was not seriously hurt, though two of my toes were badly gored. Ivan glared at me for a moment, the spike still pinning me to the ground. Then his face softened, and he drew the staff away.

'By my soul, Sasha Stroganof, you are a brave man,' he said, 'and I value such as thee.'

'Then do not needlessly estrange me for ever from thee. Give me my petition, and I shall be the truest servant in all thy realms ; refuse it, or attempt to take from me what is my own, and there is none in all Russia shall hate thee more than I.'

Ivan laughed, frowned, looked haughtily, and said :

'Nay, thy favour or thy hatred will not support or destroy the Tsar ; do as seemeth good to thee,

Stroganof. I am stronger than thou ; it is better not to withstand the Tsar. Is this the maiden ?'

The question came so unexpectedly that I only flushed and had no answer ready, but to my surprise Vera came to the rescue.

'Yes,' she said, 'I am she.' Ivan frowned and then smiled.

'Ha !' he said, 'you are one of the bold ones also, I perceive.'

'Is it boldness to acknowledge one's betrothed husband ?' she replied quietly.

'Where the Tsar is a suitor, betrothals no longer hold !' said Ivan.

'Are we slaves, then, to be bought by the highest bidder, whether we will or no ?' Vera looked so haughtily at the Tsar that I trembled, in spite of my admiration ; for, I thought, she appeared in her anger so queenly and so splendid that no man of woman born could see her and withhold his love from so magnificent a creature. But Ivan was too angry to be in love.

'Silence, you handsome fury !' he cried, half raising his hand as though to strike her. At this gesture I dared greatly, for it drove my patience clean out of me, patience being a quality which had never a very firm hold upon me.

'Dare to touch her,' I cried, 'and, Tsar though you be, I shall stretch you at my feet ; it would not be the first time, remember.'

And now again my master revealed his real greatness. Forgetting in an instant his own passion and my audacity, he only thought of the good which lay in my fearlessness, and not at all of the disloyalty and rudeness which disfigured it.

'Sasha,' he said, 'you are a man after my heart ; I swear it ! We will not quarrel. If there are others as fair as this one, I shall think of thee and leave her ; but if she be the fairest of all, I must take her. This is more than I would say to any other boyar in the realm.'

'And it is enough, sire,' said Vera ; 'come, Sasha, we have done our best, and the Tsar has done his ; the rest is with God.'

It did not appear to me that our prospects were much the brighter, for it was extremely unlikely that the Tsar would see any maiden more lovely than Vera ; but there was nothing to gain by further argument or further useless incensing of the Tsar, and my princess and I—having bowed to Ivan—withdrew, I limping a little in spite of my efforts to walk in my usual manner. Vera noticed it at once ; there was blood, too, upon my boot, and I left a track of blood as I went.

'What has happened to your foot, Sasha ?' she said ; 'see, it is bleeding.'

'The nails in the wood-pavement are badly knocked in,' I said ; 'I must have wounded myself with one of them !' Vera stopped and examined my foot. Then she suddenly started to her feet, flushing red with rage.

'Sasha,' she said—though in her agitation she could scarcely form the words—'I will die a thousand deaths, I swear it, before I consent to marry this tyrant and bully. It was he that did this. Confess it was his accursed spike that went through your foot, and you never groaned and never winced, lest I should see it, and tear his heart from his bosom !' Vera's own bosom heaved and panted in her agitation. She burst into tears, and astonished me still further by repeatedly kissing my foot when we reached the privacy of home, and afterwards washing the wound—such as it was—and doctoring it with some of Tatyána's herbs ; it was nothing of a wound in reality, but it might have been.

And over that bleeding foot of mine we solemnly vowed once again that, come what might, Vera should never be allowed to wed the young Tsar ; and once again we took comfort in the renewal of this determination. For what though the meshes of the net wound themselves ever closer around us ! At the last moment we should rend in shreds the snare and escape ; we had sworn it !

CHAPTER XIV

THE TSAR'S BRIDE-CHOICE

I MAKE no boast of my conduct at this time. I have lived long enough to regret that I was in this matter compelled to oppose my will to that of the Lord's anointed ; and yet I have little doubt—indeed, none at all—that were I to live my life over again I should act in precisely the same fashion. In a word, it is the necessity to oppose myself to the Tsar that I regretted, and do still regret ; as for the act of opposition —whether to perform it or to submit—there never was, and never could be, any question. I have been well punished for my offence, and well rewarded for my temerity ; I have suffered, and I have rejoiced ; and I say again, that, taking the one thing with the other, I should act as I acted before if the same circumstances were to arise and the same alternatives be placed before me.

The day after my encounter with the Tsar, which I have just described, was the first of Ivan's personal inspection of Russia's wealth of boyar maidenhood. I had seen many notorious beauties about the city,

and some of these were very regal-looking personages. Each of the better known beauties had her own circle of adherents and flatterers, who had assured themselves of her approaching triumph, and were doing their best to ingratiate themselves with one who might at any day blossom forth as the consort of their sovereign.

I still remember the thrill of surprise and admiration which passed over me when first I met Maria Vladimirova; and even more memorable is the moment when there rose suddenly upon me the moon-like loveliness of Anastasia Romanova, or Romanof! It was then that amazement startled me into a momentary disloyalty to my own beautiful princess, and as we suddenly encountered the Romanof *boyarishnya* I exclaimed to Vera :

‘ Oh, look, Vera ; look ! We may be safe yet ! ’

It was indeed a vision of beauty and true grace, and Vera was no whit offended or amused by my admiration for this other. On the contrary, I think she was honestly delighted to see every beautiful face that we came across, as increasing her own chance of escape.

During the preliminary stage of the Tsar's personal review of the maidens submitted to his consideration, he appeared to have little difficulty in making up his mind at least as to which of those present were altogether unworthy ; many did not receive a second glance, some were scarcely blessed

with one. Passing along the ranks of the selected maidens, Ivan signified his approval of about one in four of these by a slight bow, the lady so honoured considering herself thereby qualified to present herself at the second stage of the Tsar's selection, which was to be held on the following day. Those who received no imperial bow retired, forming, doubtless, their own opinions as to the qualification of the young Tsar to adjudicate in the matter of female attractions.

There were still 500 girls left in the competition, however, for the second stage, and these doubtless formed a higher opinion of the Tsar's good taste than the rejected. Olga Hosinsky was one of those qualified to be inspected a second time, and, of course, my splendid Vera was another. Vera looked radiantly beautiful, and was one of the very few upon whom the Tsar smiled as he bowed.

The general consensus of opinion seemed to be, after this first weeding-out of the ranks of beauty, that the three most pre-eminent in loveliness of all those assembled to court the Tsar's regard were the Vladimirova *boyarishnya*, Anastasia Romanof, and my princess; though some preferred one and some another, and Olga had her admirers as well as others.

Andrey Krilof was wild with exuberant delight. So many were the compliments and so gross the flattery poured out upon him on behalf of his beautiful sister, that he almost regarded her as the chosen

Tsaritsa already, and rallied me upon the faintness of my hopes in that quarter.

'There is time yet,' I said, 'for many things, and 500 maidens still remain to choose from !'

But after the second day, when but 100 girls remained of those qualified to reappear a third time, Vera being still one of these, Andrey was even more jubilant, and bade me make up my mind that Vera was no longer for such as me.

'On the day that Vera is Tsaritsa,' I said, 'I shall chastise the Tsar's brother-in-law. That will be a new glory to me, as well as the usual pleasure !' Andrey only laughed, and said we must both deal with new circumstances when they should arise; words were foolish things.

I met my cousin Pavel Prohorof on the third day, and he was very miserable, for Olga Hosinsky was still among those in the unrejected list, and the Tsar had even smiled upon her.

But on the fourth day, whether by accident or of set purpose, poor Olga slipped on the stairs of the Hosinsky mansion and fell, bruising her face so that she presented quite a miserable appearance. She was made to look as presentable as possible, however, by the old prince her father, and was sent in among the rest of the fifty now remaining, with a black handkerchief tied round her cheek, as though suffering from tooth-ache. The Tsar frowned when he saw her, and then laughed and passed on, remarking

that he would have no wife with aching teeth, and forthwith instructed his ‘*zoobnoy vrach*,’ or dentist, to pay more particular attention, in the matter of teeth, to all those maidens still remaining with living chances. And so Olga Hosinsky, whose teeth were in reality magnificent, passed in safety from the competition, to the bitter disappointment of the old prince and the acute delight of my good cousin Pavel, who has since made her an excellent husband.

And now there were but twenty maidens left to choose from, and soon these were reduced to ten, and still my Vera was a living chance. The Tsar, whenever I met him during this time, avoided my glance and made as though he did not see me; and as for his attitude towards Vera, in the ceremonies connected with his now very deliberate process of selection, it was such as to give no hope but that her chance of being the chosen Tsaritsa was at least as great as any. It was impossible for Vera to look anything but magnificent, or to act and speak otherwise than proudly and grandly; she could never condescend to such undignified subterfuges as that adopted by pretty Olga Hosinsky. Vera would have scorned to appear other than she was, and therefore the Tsar saw her, as I did—the loveliest and the proudest of her sex; and when the ten were reduced to five, and these again, after much careful consideration and consultation with parents, and guardians, and doctors, to *three*, my princess was still one of those who were as yet equal in the favour of the Tsar.

Of these the Romanof *boyarishnya* was, some said, the likeliest to retain that favour to the end ; though others declared that Vera Krilof's chances were equally high, and a few even pinned their faith to the attractions of the Vladimirova. This latter was a haughty, bold, disagreeable woman, and it was freely said that if the young Tsar should choose her as his bride, the Court would not be a pleasant place to abide in. She was arrogant and rude to all she came in contact with, though obsequious and flattering towards the Tsar himself ; and her attitude towards Vera and Anastasia Romanof was ill-mannered to a degree. The Romanof *boyarishnya*, on the contrary, was a very charming personality ; serious and religious, gentle, honest, sweet and kindly to all, modest, and most beautiful. As for Vera's own attitude towards the Tsar, it is a matter of wonder to me to this very day how the passionate Ivan tolerated it and even seemed to take a delight in it, excepting that he was known to be ever an ardent admirer of the high spirit. For Vera—proud Vera—made no secret of her aversion to him personally and of her disinclination to be chosen to the supreme dignity. When the Tsar spoke to or questioned her, she replied civilly but coldly, pointing out—when opportunity offered—the superior merits of the Romanof and Vladimirof maidens. Ivan would occasionally frown and stamp his foot at her, an action which never evoked more than a haughty glance from her eyes, and a curl of the lip.

When there were none but these three beautiful

creatures still competing, they were removed to the palace and accommodated with apartments there, being placed in a room together, having a sitting-chamber attached.

This move proved extremely awkward for my purposes, and almost drove me to despair, for I knew not how now to communicate with Vera, nor how to carry her off at the last moment, if it should indeed come to this that I must escape with her.

It appeared that the Tsar had his own ends in view when he caused the three maidens to be removed to the palace, and this end was to obtain secretly an insight into the character and disposition of each, by listening to their conversation, when they should be unaware of his presence.

In this way it happened that the Vladimirova, whose tongue was ever a sharp and disagreeable member, ruined her chance at the last by the unkindness of her bearing towards the other two. For in the midst of a furious wordy onslaught upon the beautiful Anastasia Romanof, during which her cruel remarks and accusations had reduced that gentle maiden to tears, the Tsar opened a door in the tapestry and greatly astonished the Vladimirova by requesting her to withdraw forthwith from the competition ; for, said he, so ungentle a nature as hers would form no proper complement to his own, which was all too rough already. Thus the Vladimirova returned to her home, to deplore for ever her uncharitable tongue ; and Vera

and the Romanova were left alone to compete for the ultimate favour of the Tsar.

And now happened that for which I bless, and have ever blessed the name of Anastasia Romanof, the beautiful and gentle bride of our Tsar ; the late beloved empress of this land, to whose goodness and wisdom—as all admit—my master is indebted for many years of happiness and of comparative freedom from those terrible fury-fits which have gained for him, since her death, the title of ‘cruel’ and ‘terrible’ ; and to whose intelligence at this time I, too, owe all that I hold most dear in this life.

After the Vladimiroova candidate had disappeared, and Vera and Anastasia Romanof were left alone, it seems that my Vera, for once in her life, broke down, and wept in Anastasia’s arms, and implored her to do what she could to save her from the fate she dreaded.

‘The issue,’ said the Romanof *boyarishnya*, kissing her tenderly and soothing her, ‘is in God’s hands, and He does all things well. Do you not love the young Tsar, my pretty one ?’

‘Less than the lowest of his subjects !’ cried Vera, sobbing ; ‘and you, I can see, love him truly and well. Is it not so ?’

‘Oh, how well !’ said Anastasia ; ‘I would die for him !’

‘And I would die rather than have him,’ sobbed Vera ; ‘never was woman more welcome to lover than you are to him, and to his throne !’

' Nay, but the issue is not in our hands ; let God choose her who is best suited to be Tsaritsa of this great empire ; and if Ivan, our dear sovereign, should deign to select either of us two, let that one joyfully and humbly acquiesce and do her best to fulfil her new and great destiny.'

' That I shall never do,' said Vera, setting her face. ' If I were chosen, then either he or I should die rather than our marriage take place ! '

' Oh, fie, fie ! ' cried Anastasia—' and thou art so beautiful and so haughty and proud—an ideal Tsaritsa as all declare ; far more like an empress than poor I ; in truth, Vera, I believe Heaven has already chosen thee for this great office——'

' Nonsense ! ' said Vera, ' the Tsar and I could never agree ; it is such as thee that the Tsar requires to make him a contented and a happy man. He would kill me in a week, or I him ! Your gentleness will soothe and tame his roughness, like oil on troubled waters ; you may save the Tsar by marrying him. I could never do that ; I should drive him mad, and he would kill me with that spike of his. And, besides all this, I ask you, for the love of God, to save me from this husband, for my heart has another husband.'

' Alas ! what can I do ? ' cried gentle Anastasia ; ' the issue is not mine, but God's and his. I love none but him ; yet if I did, I think I should forget that which was private and belonged to the former time, in this great and new destiny. Expel this old love, Vera ;

and—should you be so far blessed—welcome the new. Can you listen to the voice of Heaven—of Russia—of this godlike young Tsar, and refuse to hear it ? '

' To me there is nothing godlike in the call,' said Vera ; ' the voice of love is, for me, the voice of God. If you feel thus in the matter, Anastasia Romanova, it is your clear duty to marry the Tsar ! '

' Alas ! how gladly would I do so, were he to choose me—but he may choose thee instead ; and when I look upon thee, Vera Petrovna, I tell myself with tears that he were wise to do so ! '

' I will teach you,' said Vera, ' how it may be brought about that he shall choose you, and must choose you, because there will be none other to choose.

' No, no—a thousand times ! ' sobbed Anastasia ; ' the Tsar's choice shall be a free one. I will do nothing to hinder it, even though my life depend—as I believe it does—upon his love ! '

' Even if I swear to thee, Anastasia, that I will never wed this man, and that he or I must perish if I am chosen ? Now, listen—I do swear it, by all I hold most dear ! I swear it, by the love I bear to my own lover ; if Ivan chooses me for his bride, and it comes near to marriage between us, either he dies or I die, and the fault will be thine, for thou canst help me out of this difficulty, if thou desire it.'

' If I do so,' said Anastasia, weeping, ' is it for the Tsar's good ? Are you sure of this before Heaven ? '

'Before Heaven, for his good, in very truth ! Nay, for his salvation, his very life, his happiness—every-thing ; and mine and your own, too, Anastasia !'

'My own is nothing !' she sobbed.

'His then,' Vera repeated ; 'you will act for his good ; you will save the Tsar.'

'You are sure of this ?'

'Absolutely. Do as I desire, and the Tsar lives and loves and is happy ; refuse me and allow him to take me for his bride, and I swear to you that he can neither love me nor be happy, nor even live, for I myself will kill him, or he me.'

Anastasia shuddered and crossed herself. 'Tell me what to do and I will do it !' she said.

Then the two maidens put their heads together, with the result that the Romanof *boyarishnya* soon retired to her bed, flushed and trembling and pleading illness ; and that Vera caused a letter to be delivered to me by a trusty messenger, bidding me pass myself into the palace as a doctor summoned by herself on behalf of Anastasia, who felt herself grievously indisposed.

As for me, being half mad with the helplessness and anxiety of my position during these last few days—for Vera, having been removed to the palace, our plans of escape had all been nipped in the bud—my heart rejoiced exceedingly when I received Vera's message, for I knew that she had devised some new

plan by which to escape thus, at the last moment, the meshes of the surrounding net.

Within five minutes I had borrowed from one of our serfs the kaftan of a peasant of Perm, the long leather boots, and a fur cap, that covered more than half of my face ; the collar of the kaftan concealed the lower portion of my countenance. And thus prepared I went at once to the palace within the Kremlin walls and demanded admittance as the *znahar*, or wise-man of Kamka, stating that my master, Prince Andrey Krilof, had heard a rumour that there was illness within the apartments occupied by his sister, and had therefore desired me, the family leech, to investigate the matter, and in case of necessity to attend to her ailments, since I was thoroughly acquainted with her constitution and was accustomed to treat her when at home at our own village.

By this means I was allowed access to the princess, though the doorkeeper and others laughed arrogantly at my appearance and mission ; for they had seen foreign doctors, of late, about the Court, and had already begun to look down upon plain Russian costumes and unassuming Russian *znahars* ; but the laugh went the other way before they were many hours older.

CHAPTER XV

THE ROMANOVA

As I passed through the rooms and passages which lay between the front entrance and the apartments occupied by the maidens still in competition, I caught sight of young Tsar Ivan, drinking and playing chess with some of his favourite companions. He looked flushed and angry, and spoke in loud tones, and I judged that the fortune of the game had gone against him, or that he had taken indiscreetly of the wine upon the table; for at this time Ivan was given to intemperate habits of self-indulgence—habits which the companionship and influence of gentle Anastasia Romanof afterwards modified most beneficially.

In the chamber of the maidens I found my Vera awaiting me, pale and agitated. She received me distantly, as though fearful of observation, but whispered that I must take no notice, since the Tsar might be listening and watching from behind the tapestries, as he was known to do ; but I reassured her by saying that I had seen him at play with his boyars.

‘Then we may speak freely,’ said Vera ; ‘and first

let me tell you, that when you go forth this evening from the palace, I must go with you, Sasha, or we are lost !'

'Then you shall come, if I die for it !' I said ; 'come at once !'

'Not so,' said Vera ; 'there must be no force or noise, but only cunning ; force would not avail us here, not even the prowess of my Sasha Stroganof !'

'Speak on, then,' I said ; 'what have you in your mind ?'

'The *boyarishnya* Romanof, my only rival, is sick in the chamber adjoining ; she is really ill with excitement and the shock of what I have told her—namely, that I shall escape to-night and leave the victory with her. But in her sickness is our salvation. You, as leech, can insist upon my removal, lest Anastasia's illness prove dangerous and infectious. The Tsar will make no difficulty, if persuaded that there is danger. What think you of the plan ?'

'The plan is good,' I said ; 'but who is to persuade the Tsar of this ? Me he would recognise.'

'I will send the woman who attends us—she is with the Romanova,' said Vera ; 'come you in now, as *znahar* and leech, and frighten her ; and she will frighten the Tsar.'

So together Vera and I passed into the next room, where lay the beautiful Anastasia, flushed and panting, tended by the old Russian nurse, her own body-servant. I could see at a glance that there was nothing

the matter with the maiden excepting agitation, which my presence greatly increased. Nevertheless, I sent the nurse with word to the Tsar that the *boyarishnya* was sick, and that Princess Krilof must be separated from her, and I listened at the open door as she went with her message. I could distinctly hear the loud, heightened tones of the angry Ivan, as he conversed with the old woman. His luck at play must have been very bad, for he was ruder and more violent than I had yet heard him, and in his excitement he showed his mind more, perhaps, than he knew—his mind, that is, of the moment. For after the old nurse had delivered her message, I heard him shout at her, and say :

‘ Which of the two is ill, you hag ? That is the point—quick, speak.’

And after the nurse had spoken—

‘ Ah ! the Romanof. I would with all my heart it were that she-devil. She may die, for me, when she pleases, and the devil have his own ; and she would depart lest the Romanof infect her—ha ! that is good ! lest the Romanof infect her ! Now depart from me, before I kill you, you hag ; stay, tell the she-devil Krilof to go quickly where she will ; I desire not to set eyes upon her again. Let her be away in five minutes, before I come to see what ails my Tsaritsa ! ’

Back came the trembling and frightened Marfa with her message, which she delivered to Vera in a modified form ; and away sped my princess and I out

of the palace into the night, confused and only half realising the sudden and instant success of our plan of escape. For in truth neither she nor I had accurately gauged the Tsar's mind in this matter ; nor do I wholly understand to this day his attitude towards Vera during that long and agitating period of bride-selecting. It is not my opinion that his real preference was ever in doubt ; but it is probable that other considerations besides preference influenced him, and that this was why he wavered in the balance between the haughtiness of Vera and the gentleness of Anastasia ; and that he chose the latter in a moment of wrath as the more peaceful haven for so turbulent a spirit as his own, showing thereby his wisdom and sagacity. But Vera suggested that he intended from the first to choose the Romanof, and that he deliberately kept her (Vera) in suspense, in order to punish and subdue her for her haughty spirit in openly avowing her disinclination to be chosen by him ; perhaps also he desired to punish me for my presumption in appealing to him, as I had done, to leave me my ewe lamb. I have reason to believe that Vera entertained in the secret depths of her heart other opinions on the matter ; but it was ever a subject which she disliked to discuss. However this may have been, it is certain that, on the following day, Anastasia Romanof—now happily restored to health—was proclaimed the chosen of the Tsar, and homage was done to her by all, as to the Tsaritsa elect. As for my Vera, her crestfallen

brother Andrey left Moscow with her the same day, by order of the Tsar, to return to Molebsk ; for it now appeared that his Majesty was as anxious to see her no more as he had formerly seemed attracted by her ; and there are those who hold that Ivan was afraid of being influenced by her amazing beauty to change his mind at the last moment in spite of his better judgment. As for me, I sometimes think—knowing my great master as I do, and understanding better than most how noble a spirit was concealed beneath that rugged and passionate exterior—I sometimes think that he was indeed in love with Vera, against his own inclinations, and that out of an honourable desire to accede to my petition, he did violence to his own feelings, recognising that he had deliberately fallen under the spell of Vera's beauty without intending at the first to do more than punish me and her for our presumption ; and in this opinion I have at times received remarkable confirmation, even from the highest source.

If it be so, this would account for his great and lasting anger against me, which has been a cause of deep grief to me for many years, and is still a regretful memory, even though in his later years my master and I were inseparable companions, and all was forgiven between us. None ever guessed or supposed that I had acted leech, or rather the village wise-man, on that last evening of doubt and danger. If the Tsar had known this, he would never have forgiven me ; and since the deception led to every good result

and to no evil, who would blame the gentle Tsaritsa for her very slight share in it, and for not delivering Vera and me into the hands of the Tsar ? No woman in the world could have made a better wife to Ivan than did this Anastasia Romanof.¹ Oh, that she had lived as long as he !

I was unwilling to leave Moscow without at least paying my respects to the Tsar and to his newly-elected bride. I therefore remained behind, promising Vera that I would ride quickly after her party as soon

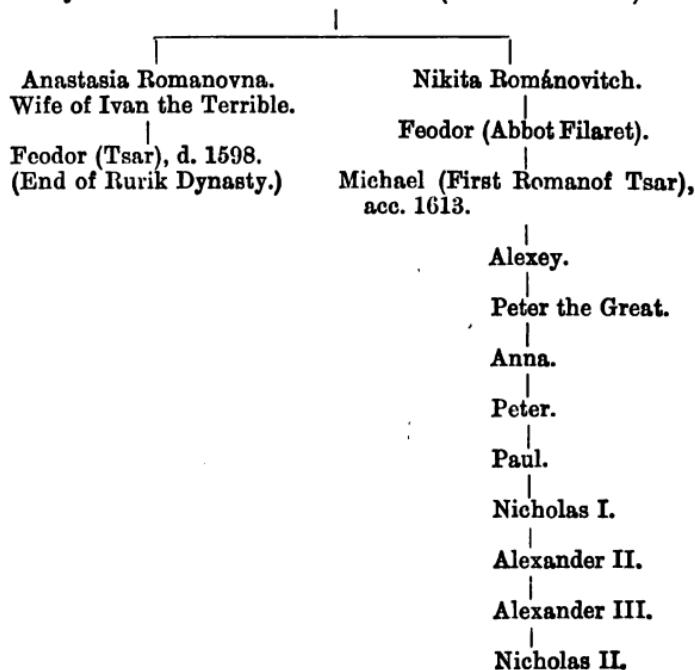
¹ The Anastasia Romanof, mentioned in Boyar Stroganof's reminiscences as the wife of Ivan the Terrible, was the first of the Romanof family to come into prominence in Russian history, though as Destiny ruled it, she was not the progenitrix of the Romanof Dynasty, in spite of the fact that she was the first of that name to occupy, conjointly with her husband, the throne of Russia.

Anastasia bore sons to Ivan ; but of these the second only survived and succeeded his father ; Feodor, a youth of weak intellect, who required no less than five Regents to assist him in guiding the Ship of the State. Feodor died without issue, and in him perished politically, for the time being, the line of Romanof, while that of Rurik collapsed finally. As for the Romanofs, who had flashed suddenly into prominence in the person of Anastasia, at Feodor's death the family retired once more into obscurity ; while for fifteen years the affairs of the State were mismanaged by the boyars. But suddenly, by a turn of Fortune's wheel, the house of Romanof once more came to the front. Anastasia's brother Nikita, brother-in-law and favourite of Ivan the Terrible, had been a popular character in his day. This popularity he transmitted to his son Feodor, better known as the Abbot Filaret ; and when the Russian people grew tired of the boyar-rule of the last fifteen years, which was another way of spelling anarchy, and clamoured for a Dynasty and a settled state of affairs, Feodor's young son, Michael Romanof, was unanimously chosen to be Tsar of Russia, and the real founder of the Great Dynasty which still maintains its firm hold upon the hearts of the Russian people. I append a shortened pedigree of the House of Romanof, showing how

as the necessary courtesies should have been accomplished. There was a great reception at the palace in honour of the Tsaritsa elect, and the beautiful Romanof looked more radiantly beautiful, in her own moon-like loveliness, than ever before, being now supremely and absolutely happy; and this not, as I firmly believe, by reason of a gratified ambition but rather in the fruition of her love-dream. None who beheld her that day could rest for a moment in doubt as to the all-absorbing nature of her love for young

Stroganof's friend, Anastasia Romanof, was related to, though not the founder of, the present Dynasty.

Boyar Román Yurevitch Zachárin. (Born about 1500.)



Tsar Ivan, whom she followed with her eyes wheresoever he went and came, seeming to think nothing of the throngs of boyarins and boyarinyas who surrounded and flattered and complimented her, or rather to have no time to devote to them if the Tsar were in the room, since all her attention must then go to gaining a look or a smile from him. To my own congratulations she made an automatic reply without glancing at me; but when—out of curiosity, and perhaps in the spirit of mischief—I asked her softly whether her feverish symptoms had abated since the previous evening, she flushed deeply, and starting, gazed quickly in my face.

'Are you the beloved of the Krilova?' she asked me.

'I am her lover,' I said.

'Tell her that, though I stand in the place which is hers by right, for she is far more beautiful than I, it is better so than that he should marry one who dares to speak of him as she spoke last night. Tell her I have thought of her and her terrible words all night, and wept for her, and prayed for her unruly spirit. What is your name?'

'Alexander Stroganof,' said I.

'Then I will pray for you also, Alexander Stroganof, lest in her turbulence of spirit she grow angry with you, and do with you as she threatened to do with him.'

'But I am not the Tsar Ivan,' I said, surprised;

'she loves me well, and it is on my behalf that she is against the Tsar.'

'But such a spirit as hers may change suddenly and without warning, therefore I shall pray for your safety and her sanity,' said Anastasia. 'And now, if she be still in Moscow, take her hence, I entreat you, boyar; for, since last night, I have no peace because of her. I fear her for my Tsar's sake.'

Poor Vera had evidently succeeded in very completely terrifying this gentle, beautiful creature, and I shall never forget the intensity of her relief when I informed her that my formidable princess had already left Moscow.

'Oh, thank God,' she said; 'He has already heard my prayer!'

The young Tsar, when he caught sight of me, peered instantly about among the crowd, looking, as I felt sure, for Vera, in case she should also be present. When he did not find her, he frowned and was gloomy for the rest of the morning. Did he wish to find her there, in spite of his own order to her to depart at once? In all truth I know not. Yet if, by some chance, or by the perversity of destiny or of Vera's temper, she had remained for this day in order to attend the reception, what would have happened? Again I say, I know not at all. Perhaps the sight of my most beautiful princess would have upset the Tsar's mind once more, so that he would have thrown all prudence to the winds, rejected the Romanova in the moment

of her triumph, and replaced her with a bride whose heart was in no wise his own ; but, no, this could never have happened ! Nevertheless it was good for all concerned that Vera and her fascinations were absent on that day.

The Tsar spoke to me, but he was angry, and his demeanour was not friendly.

' Ha, Stroganof ! ' he said, pretending to see me for the first time. ' When do you return to Perm ? '

' I start to-morrow, Tsar,' I said.

' Very well,' said he, ' there is a tiger-cat already on the road ; see that she does not tear out your eyes ! '

' I can take care of myself, wherever I go,' I said, affecting not to comprehend his meaning, ' against men or devils.'

' Never mind the men,' he said, ' but beware of devils, if you are wise, especially she-devils.'

I bowed. It was useless to continue such a conversation, and I was withdrawing in order to depart from his presence ; but the Tsar called me back, his voice sounding a little more gentle than before.

' Stop, Stroganof,' he said ; ' tell me, shall you marry forthwith down in your own country ? '

' When I have won my bride,' I said.

' Is she not won already ? ' asked the Tsar, quickly.

' She is won, but not her guardians,' I replied unadvisedly.

' You are too young to marry, Sasha,' he said.

'It is different for the Tsar ; but if you will be advised, you will wait a year or two.'

I laughed, for I was angry. 'I am not a child,' I said, 'but a free boyar, and my Tsar is not my schoolmaster !' Ivan frowned and stamped.

'Go, then,' he said, 'go from my sight, seek your tiger-cat, and marry whom and when you please ; you are nothing to me, you that might have been the Tsar's friend !'

'Ask me to do any service that a boyarin of Russia owes to his Tsar, and I will serve you to the last drop of my blood,' I said, 'Ivan Vasilitch ; but you shall not be my taskmaster, nor I your slave. A Stroganof may marry or give in marriage without asking permission excepting of the lady's parents or guardians.'

'And what if the Tsar forbids those parents or guardians to listen to the proposals of a disobedient boyar ?' said Ivan, looking very black. I kept my eye upon his staff, for I did not desire to have my foot pinned a second time to the floor.

'Then the boyar may possibly increase the measure of his disobedience by taking his affairs into his own hands,' I said, and bowing, withdrew before the angry Tsar could strike me, which I think he otherwise would have done at that moment.

CHAPTER XVI

A LOST PRINCESS

By this last rudeness I made for myself a bitter enemy in the Tsar, who pursued me relentlessly with his ill-will for many years from this time, refusing all submission from me and every attempt at reconciliation.

And the first sign of this state of things showed itself soon after my return to Perm. I had overtaken Vera and her brother, and travelled with them without much adventure homewards, and had seen my beloved princess safely restored to her own residence in Molebsk ; from which day onwards life returned for us into its old channels, and for a week or two matters went on exactly as in the former days before these wild excitements of imperial bride-elections had arisen to mar our peace. Perhaps ‘peace’ is scarcely the word to use, for there was little of peace between myself and the brothers Krilof, whose attitude towards me was no more friendly now than formerly, but rather less so ; for my proud Vera made no secret of how she had treated the young Tsar with no more consideration than any other unwelcome suitor, and

the Krilofs were of opinion that, had Vera chosen to exert her fascinations or even to act with passive toleration towards the Tsar, he would certainly have selected her instead of the Romanof; and, further, that she had thrown away her chance of preferment and all the dazzling prospects of almost certain selection as Tsaritsa-elect, out of a perverse and childish partiality for my unworthy self, a mere boyar, and—worst of all—a Stroganof. Hence I was not a welcome guest at Molebsk, and there were many quarrels between myself and these young men; but all this and a great deal more would I have gladly and deliberately undergone for the joy of occasionally riding out with my princess, and of hunting and laughing and laying plans with her amid the solitudes of our beloved pine-forests, where none could hear our confidences—neither angry brothers, nor tapestry-hidden Tsars; but only the solemn, nodding sentinel-pines, that heard but told no secrets, and the laughing grouse, which heard and enjoyed all, but betrayed us only to its own kind to give them something to laugh at.

But when spring was at the full and the ice on the Kama was rotting daily, so that I expected to see the open water each morning, as I rode towards Molebsk one day I encountered Vera, some miles from home. She sat dejectedly, and I could see from afar that something was wrong, and she mused so deeply that she did not see us until Borka leaped up at her

and whined, having run on ahead of me to pay her this courtesy.

Then Vera told me the news, which was that the Tsar had actually sent a messenger from Moscow, bearing an *ookaz*, which forbade the marriage for a term of two years of such of the *boyarishnui* as had remained in the competition up to the last five places.

'But he is now married—so we have heard,' I said, aghast.

'That is true, and the messenger does not deny it,' said Vera.

'Then by what right does this Tsar dictate to us when and whom we may marry,' I exclaimed; 'he has had his first choice—is that not enough for him?'

'The Romanova is delicate, the messenger says,' explained Vera, 'and may possibly fail to support the strain of her new greatness; he thinks the Tsar is anxious to save the great company of *boyarishnui* the trouble of re-selection, in case of accidents, and prefers to retain a claim upon four or five only instead of troubling as many thousands.'

'It is monstrous,' I said, 'and ridiculous; I acknowledge no such rights of the Tsar over his boyars.'

'Neither do I,' said Vera; 'but my brothers are delighted.'

'That of course,' I replied, flushing, 'and equally of course we shall respect neither Tsar's *ookaz* nor brothers' selfish ambition when the proper time comes!'

'Certainly not,' she said ; 'but what if they lock me up, as they threaten, in order to keep me safe from interference during these two years ?'

'They dare not ; I will come like a fairy prince and release you,' I cried. 'Do you seriously think they can keep me from you, Vera ?'

'No, I do not,' she said, 'neither they nor the Tsar !'

All this was comforting to our feelings, and gave us hope and mutual confidence ; but, though we parted that day with everything arranged for escaping together at a certain hour of a morning in the following week, and getting married when and wherever we could, yet our boastful belief in my invincible power to do as I pleased was destined to receive a rude shock. We had arranged to meet at that point in the road to Moscow where the roads from Molebsk and Perm converge, and to ride on together a fourteen days' journey to a place called Ruchief, where we—or rather Vera and her party—had put up at the house of the priest during her journey from Viatka after the preliminary selection. Vera had greatly befriended this poor priest, whose wife was sick and he penniless, and we relied upon the gratitude he then expressed to make a claim upon him in return ; in a word, we would request him to marry us, and we did not doubt his readiness to comply with our desires, especially as we should support these with a heavy fee.

But when, on the day appointed, I rode to the

place of rendezvous at the hour fixed for our meeting, there was no sign of Vera ; and though I waited, in impatience and consternation, for half the day, she did not appear.

Then I rode towards Molebsk, and arrived there at nightfall. The little town consisted but of a few small houses and huts, with the Krilof mansion towering white and huge among them, and I galloped furiously to the great wooden front door of the house, resolved to set the establishment by the ears, whether sleeping or waking ; for I felt certain that some kind of trick had been played upon Vera, as otherwise no number of brothers would prevent my princess from doing exactly as her will dictated, in going and coming, and I was proportionately angry with those who had dared to thwart her.

But, though I hammered and banged upon that door loud enough to rouse the inmates, even if they had been dead instead of only asleep, there was no reply, and no light was shown at door or window. The house was empty and deserted.

I went round to the yard, to the stables, where I knew every groom—all of whom, unlike their masters, were my very good friends—but the back premises were all as deserted as the front, and not a horse neighed in stable or yard, not a living thing moved.

As I came into the street I heard the village cowherd stirring, and presently he passed along, blowing

his long horn to summon his cows—it was three in the morning or near it—and him I questioned for news of the Krilofs. They had departed a week ago, said the man, but whither he knew not, for nothing had been said as to their destination ; probably they were at Kamka, their summer resort.

The same idea had struck me also, and after I had fed poor old Daniel—who had had a long journey and ought to have been very tired, though he was too proud to show it—I mounted my good horse and set his face for Kamka.

But neither at Kamka did I receive the comfort of finding my betrothed, for the Kamka *dacha*, or country house, was as empty and deserted as the town mansion at Molebsk. Only here I at least discovered a friend who could be of service to me, in the old *ochotnik* (hunter) who had charge of the wolfhounds which dwelt, a great noisy pack, in kennels at some distance from the house.

This old man, Stepán, informed me that the family had departed to Moscow nearly a week ago, having called in at Kamka to leave orders as they passed. They had dismissed their servants, the greater number of them, to their homes—most of these being of course serfs on the estate, they had not far to go ; and had signified the intention of remaining away during the whole of the summer.

Old Stepán added that he had not seen the *boyarishnya* Vera, but only Prince Andrey, the rest of

the family having remained within the travelling carriages without descending to converse with him or others.

Here indeed was a checkmate for me.

It was bad enough that Vera should have been spirited away at all ; but that she should have gone to Moscow was infinitely worse. Why should she have been taken there, unless with the deliberate intention of reawakening the Tsar's interest in her, and of keeping her before his eyes in order that, should he weary of Anastasia (in which case the poor Tsaritsa would probably fall a victim before long to her husband's terrible passions), or if the weakly young Tsaritsa should really fail in health, Vera might be at hand to step immediately into the coveted vacant place at his side ? I was forced to conclude that this, or something like it, must be the interpretation to be put upon the action of the Krilofs in thus carrying their sister back into the lion's den.

Here, too, were the materials for a tremendous imperial tragedy ; for none knew better than I that if my Vera were forced against her will into marriage with this Tsar, she would not hesitate to take his life or her own.

That force had been exercised in order to compel Vera to leave her home without acquainting me of the fact was quite certain ; and it remained only for me to rest Daniel for a few hours, and then to start once more upon that long ride to Moscow, which I had

already so lately accomplished, in the hope of overtaking the Krilof party before they could reach the capital, in which case I knew well what I should do! They had, however, nearly a full week's start of me, and I doubted whether even my faithful Daniel was capable of making good so great an advantage. Also, I rightly concluded that these Krilos, who knew my disposition sufficiently well by this time, would not tarry by the way, since they would be sure enough that I should follow at the very first information I received of their departure; and that if I overtook them on the road it would no longer be an affair of staff-duelling, or wrestling, but a grim matter of life and death between us.

And this is doubtless the reason why, though I rode so hard that for the first time in my life I felt old Daniel tiring beneath me, yet from day to day I did not seem to gain more than one mile in five, and that, I calculated, would hardly suffice to bring me up with them. But the reports of those to whom I applied for information varied so greatly that it was almost impossible to discover for certain how far in advance were those I desired to overtake: one peasant would tell me four days; the next would scratch his head, calculate, and pronounce it five; while a third would declare it to be three; and it was not until I reached Ruchief, a village which I have already mentioned, and rested at the house of the old priest Father Ivan (Vera's friend, and he on whom we had

relied to marry us in our need), that I at last obtained information which was really trustworthy. And here I received also the first grain of comfort that I had tasted since my discovery of Vera's departure—namely, a letter from my princess, dictated by her to this good Father Ivan, and written by him in her name unbeknown to her brothers. My betrothed was not free to write for herself, nor free indeed to speak when or to whom she would, or to stir hand or foot excepting under surveillance ; for it had come, as I gathered, to this, that her brothers were carrying her a captive to Moscow, in order to sell her, or to deliver her, so to speak, bound to the Tsar if they should find that he desired to have her. That Vera was able to convey to me a message through Father Ivan was due only to the fact that he was a minister of religion, and therefore, under plea of confession and ghostly counsel, my poor princess was able to enjoy a few minutes of conversation uninterrupted by the presence of others, during which short interval she sent me the following message : ‘ My brothers have torn me from home to carry me I know not whither, nor for what purpose ; if, as I feel assured you will, you receive this message from the good father speed onwards swiftly but cautiously, for my brothers and their servants are armed to cut you to pieces, being determined for reasons of their own that our intercourse must end, if necessary, in your death at their hands ; this I know for certain, therefore beware. But if you

should reach Moscow after us, and I shall have disappeared, ask the Tsar first for news of me, and afterwards look out for a white kerchief at a window.'

'And when was the princess here?' I asked of the good father.

'When, but yesterday,' said he, 'about this very hour.'

So that I had gained upon them my week, all but one day! Good Daniel! he had wearied himself to some purpose.

That night I rested well at the priest's house, and Daniel rested well also, as he so richly deserved to do; and on the following day, taking the good father's blessing with me and his tearful warnings to beware of those wicked Krilofs, who would sell their sister to gratify their own ambitions, and would spill my blood without remorse to accomplish their end, I rode quickly forth once more upon the track of my captive princess. I could not, I knew, overtake the party on that day, nor probably on the next; but on the third from this I expected to have them in view, and so, indeed, it turned out. For on the third morning, but two or three hours after sunrise on a lovely May day, I rode at last into earshot of the jangling bells of the travelling carriage, and five minutes later I was in sight of the party.

I had formed but the simplest plan of action. All that I knew and had distinctly determined was, that I must overthrow these three Krilof brothers, of

whose prowess I had the poorest opinion ; and that having scattered or slain them (for it had come to this, that I cared not at this time what became of them, nor whether they lived or died), I must seize my betrothed and ride back with her into the sanctuary of the priest's house, where we should first be united by the holy rites of the Church, and then let him interfere who dared between me and my wedded wife, be he Krilof, or Tsar, or devil !

It appeared that the Krilosfs feared or expected my approach from behind, for they had posted a rear-guard on horseback, whose duty was to keep a look-out upon the road, and this man espied me as soon as I saw him and the rest ; whereupon, by some concerted signal, he gave the alarm, and instantly a body of several men lagged behind, while the carriage was driven rapidly onwards at increased speed. I shouted with all my might, in the vain hope of prevailing upon the coachman—whom I knew well—to stop, and partly with the intention of making known to my betrothed that I was at hand ; but Timoféy, the driver, was too frightened to stop or to obey me at the expense of obedience to his masters, and the carriage bumped and jolted along faster than ever. But that my princess heard my voice and was able to convey to me that she had heard it was, to my ecstasy, proved by the fluttering for a moment of a white kerchief from the carriage window.

I counted five horsemen arrayed against me as I

advanced, and these were drawn up across the road to prevent my passage. There were Andrey Krilof and his two brothers and two servants, all armed with swords and well mounted. They made no movement as I rode towards them and said no word aloud, though I could see Andrey muttering to the rest, instructions or encouragements, I knew not which.

'Stand back,' I cried, as I came close to them ; 'I am a desperate man to-day, Andrey, and care not what I do—for pass I will.'

'We are all desperate men to-day,' said Andrey, pale but determined ; 'we have had enough of this hunting of our sister by you, and are determined to put an end to it. Turn and ride home, if you will, while you can. You see, we are more than you, and have you at mercy !'

'Yes, five swords to one !' I cried mockingly ; 'but only Krilof swords, which count for little ! Come on, five swords to one !'

I rode straight at them, and the hacking began. The Krilofs were small men and rather slight and feeble of limb, but of great spirit. Both the servants were cowards, and escaped out of the fray in a moment, one with a cut in the shoulder which made him howl again ; the other, I believe, scathless. Andrey hacked furiously at me, and I was obliged to bring my sword so violently down upon his head that he fell from his horse a dead man. But Feodor and Osip Krilof attacked me simultaneously so vigorously that

first Osip's sword wounded my own sword-arm, and then the point of Feodor's weapon entered my shoulder and I fell from Daniel's back, just as poor Daniel—wounded in several places—fell also, his body resting on my own upon the ground. And this was the last that I remembered of that fray, for my senses suddenly deserted me, and for a space of time I knew nothing. When I recovered, I found that poor Daniel, who still lay upon me, was dead. My enemies had disappeared, one and all, and had carried dead Andrey with them, together with marks of my sword upon their own persons which I think they will carry with them to the grave; for I distinctly remember touching Osip and Feodor at least once each, and my sword has never been one to scratch the skin and leave no scar.

I wept over my faithful Daniel, and prayed to God, if he possessed a soul, to keep that soul in perpetual peace. I cannot think that the most faithful of dumb creatures are to go to the grave eternally without compensation for their loyalty and good service to man on the earth; for duty faithfully done to man is done to God; and perhaps the wisdom of the Almighty has rewards that we dream not of for the faithful servants of man!

Then I kissed old Daniel's forehead and dragged myself away on foot, bleeding considerably at arm and shoulder, but not—as I could plainly feel—very seriously hurt; and fortunately I reached, within an

hour, a small village, the Starost, or chief peasant, of which—having first crossed himself in horror at my blood-stained appearance—took me in and tended me carefully, washing my wounds and treating them with herbs and ice from his *lyédnik* (ice-cellar). And here, under the kind care of Starost Piotr Kurágin, I languished in fever and impatience for two long weeks, during which I was distracted for news of my Vera, but of course received none; and at last, my wounds being healed, I bought a pony of Piotr and rode away by short stages towards Moscow, weak and anxious and miserable, and fearing for my princess I know not what terrible things.

CHAPTER XVII

THE TSAR'S DISCLAIMER

My first destination after arriving in Moscow was of course the Krilof mansion, though I scarcely expected to find the house occupied ; and in this my instinct did not deceive me. The old servant in charge of the house informed me that he had seen nothing of his masters or of the *boyarishnya* Vera ; they had not arrived in Moscow, and were not expected, he said ; they had returned to Molebsk some months ago.

So that this visit to Moscow, with Vera a captive, was to be a secret one. Was it undertaken by order of the Tsar, or with his knowledge and approval ? or was it a private family speculation of the Krilofs, based upon the *ookaz* of the Tsar forbidding Vera's marriage for two years, and fostered by the brothers' ambition ?

In either case it might be convenient to make the visit a secret one, and to leave the family house unoccupied in order that the fact of Vera's presence in the capital might remain unknown.

But as for me, my own course was clear. I should go straight to the Tsar and persuade, or threaten, or force him to tell me all he knew. If he could be passionate and violent, so could I. I had braved him before this, and I would brave him again. As a matter of fact, I had never lost ground with Ivan through standing up manfully to him ; and if he was in league with these Krilofs to do any wrong to Vera, why, I cared not a jot whether I lost ground with him or not, so long as I could win back my princess to freedom and safety.

Therefore, having visited my own quarters at the Stroganof mansion, and removed the stains of travel, attiring myself as became a boyar of my position, I proceeded towards the Kremlin, in order to have this question of the Tsar's guilt or innocence settled once for all. On the way I met one whom I had not seen for over two years—Adashef, the young boyar whom I had assisted in reclaiming the boy-Tsar from his youthful follies and irregularities. To see Adashef was as soothing and exhilarating as to see the sun burst forth from the dark clouds : his presence in Moscow was a good omen, for I knew well that his influence over the Tsar was peculiar, and that while he was by, the good in Ivan invariably predominated over the evil.

Adashef recognised me at once.

' What, Sasha Stroganof ! ' he cried, embracing me with gladness ; ' who would think to see you here ?

I was told you were in Perm. Have you come to make your peace with the Tsar? If so, you have done wisely, for he is strangely wroth with you, and will say nothing of the reason.'

'Yes,' I said, 'I have come to make peace with the Tsar—or war; it is as he pleases, and deserves!' Adashef laughed.

'If it depends upon his pleasure and his deserts,' he said, 'Ivan will have it peace, for he loves you well, Sasha, as I know better than most, being, in a manner, the keeper of his conscience, I and his new friend, the monk Sylvester. As for his deserts, if God judges us by our tendency and not by our past actions (as some declare), then Ivan is in a state of grace; for things go well with him at present!'

'Indeed!' I said, smiling scornfully; for I imagined that I knew more of the Tsar's mind, perhaps, than even Adashef, and believed that I was acquainted with certain devised or perpetrated villainy of which this good man knew nothing—'indeed; and in which sense go they well?'

'The Tsar grows serious and very religious,' said Adashef; 'the influence of his young wife is all on the side of good; and since he loves her well and unfeignedly, that influence is also strong.'

This was unexpected news to me, and for a moment almost induced me to change my intention to beard the Tsar on Vera's account; for it seemed to me to be clear enough, if matters were as Adashef

declared, that this enterprise of the Krilos was a private one, and not to be laid at Ivan's door. But then it occurred to me that, though this might be so, yet even if it were not, Ivan would not have been likely to confide his heart's secrets to this good Adashef, but would more probably, in such a case, deceive the keeper of his conscience in every way he could. Therefore I laughed a second time, and said that I should believe more in Ivan's conversion when it had worked off its novelty, and in his absorbing love for the Romanof Tsaritsa when it had lasted a little longer.

'Fie!' said Adashef. 'I am not pleased with thee to-day, Sasha; my way is to believe in all good, and to disbelieve as much as possible in evil. Try it for yourself, and you will find that much of the bitterness of life is lost.'

'I will believe in all the good I find in the Tsar,' I said earnestly; 'I am more anxious to see this good in him than you would imagine; but I must see him first, and after that I will speak with you again on this matter!'

'Make your peace with him if you are wise,' said Adashef, as we parted, 'it is worth a sacrifice; for Ivan will need all his honest boyars, he has not too many such!'

This, I fear, was a very true speech of Adashef's.

The Tsar was at meat within the palace when I arrived, and, exercising my right as a boyar of the



I favour thee with bread and salt

realm, I entered the dining-hall and took my seat at the lower end of the table, where there were places vacant for chance arrivals. The distribution of bread and salt, the preliminary process in these palace meals, was still in progress ; the Tsar cutting pieces from the loaf, standing, and sending them in turn to his boyars upon a gold platter, naming each recipient as he did so with the formula ‘Stepán Ivanitch Glinsky’ (or whoever the boyar might be), ‘I favour thee with bread and salt.’ Each boyar thus named and favoured stood up in his place and bowed, but said nothing ; for it is the rule that none may speak to the Tsar during dinner, excepting when invited to do so.

After the bread and salt, portions from the rest of the dishes were passed round with the same formalities ; and all the appointments used at the table—dishes, platters, and forks—were of pure gold.

The Tsar knew every one of the boyars present by name, and never made a mistake in addressing them, standing up to despatch each portion and looking at the boyar addressed, sometimes with favour, sometimes frowning. Upon me he bestowed the most savage of frowns as he sent me my portion of bread and salt, but I made as though I observed nothing, either then or afterwards, and to his formula, ‘Alexander Stroganof, I favour thee with bread and salt,’ I merely bowed my head with respect, and betook me to my victuals.

After dinner was over, I was among those waiting

for an audience of the Tsar, and was one of the first to be invited into his apartment; and when I stood before my young master I saw at once that he was not prepared to be friendly disposed towards me.

'I have done with you,' he said. 'Why have you come? I have other boyars as good as you, and loyal besides.' It was not an encouraging welcome.

'I am as loyal as any,' I said, 'I do but seek my own.'

The Tsar stamped. 'Is not that old matter done with yet?' he cried. 'I sent your tiger-cat to her home months ago; in two years you shall marry her if she has not torn your eyes out before that!'

'You sent her home, certainly,' I said; 'but you have summoned her again to Moscow, and that is why I am here, to demand her back; neither Tsar nor devil shall keep her from me!'

'What do you mean by these words?' said Ivan, paling, and flushing again. 'Is Vera Krilof in Moscow? Who brought her—where is she?'

'That is what I have come to ask you,' I said; 'and what you shall tell me, Tsar though you be, before I leave this room.'

'Stop!' he said with dignity, 'there is no need for foolish threats and empty words; a Tsar does not lie—I tell you that I know nothing of Princess Vera Krilof. If you know that she is in Moscow, you know more than I.' The Tsar looked very dignified as he said these words; and I saw at once that,

whatever might be the reading of the mystery of Vera's disappearance, this which he had spoken was the truth as he knew it.

'Pardon, then, Ivan Vasilitch,' I said, bending my head in some confusion; 'the Princess Vera has been carried to Moscow by her brothers, and I am in great distress because of her. If I imagined that the Tsar knew of her coming and of her present whereabouts, it was because I took for granted of every man who has seen Vera Krilof that he must love her, even a Tsar, for which foolishness as a lover I may be forgiven.'

'I do not forgive this or anything in thee,' cried Ivan, angrily; 'and as for love, I have no love for she-devils; I have married an angel from heaven, and I thank God that I did not choose thy Krilova. There, is that enough of words? Wilt thou go now? I weary of thee, Stroganof, upon my soul; with thee it is all misunderstandings and disloyalties. There are better boyars than thou in plenty; go, find thy tiger-cat—only go!'

'One favour, Tsar,' I said, 'though you do not love me: grant me this, and you shall own one day that I am a true boyar and not disloyal, but faithful to the last drop of my blood; if I find my betrothed, renounce your two years' claim upon her, and sanction my immediate marriage.' The Tsar flushed red and stamped again.

'Silence!' he cried furiously. 'What I have said,

I have said ; a Tsar's *ookaz* is not like a boyar's loyalty, to be put forth and drawn in at his own convenience. You have seen my *ookaz*: for two years, four maidens are sacred to the Tsar, and Vera Krilof is one of them ; if her brothers have concealed her in order to protect her from dishonest and disloyal boyars who would rob the Tsar of his own, they have done wisely and loyally ! '

' Rob the Tsar of his own ! ' I repeated bitterly ; ' the Tsar has his own and that, apparently, is not enough for him ; he must have also that which is not his own.'

' Go, Stroganof,' said the Tsar coldly ; ' do not anger me more ; you know my temper.' But I was not to be held now ; my passion had burst its bonds.

' Yes,' I cried mockingly, ' I know your temper—I have cause to know it—and now I know also how sincere is your dislike for the Princess Vera ; some there are who call this kind of dislike by a different name. If you hate this maiden, as you profess, why must she be kept at your claim for two years ? '

For the second time, Ivan raised his staff upon me. This time he did not attempt to pin my foot to the ground, as before, but thrust furiously at my throat with the spike. But whether his aim failed, or whether he felt compunction at the last moment, and therefore swerved his arm, it so fell out that the weapon only grazed my neck, just scratching the skin sufficiently to show the blood and no more. He stood glaring at

me for a full minute, and I at him. I feared that he would attack me again and more formidably ; if he had, I should have dashed the staff from his hand, for I had no mind to be killed, and my princess perhaps in need of me. But suddenly Ivan's countenance changed—he threw his weapon upon the floor, crossed himself devoutly, and casting himself upon his knees before the *ikon* in the corner of the room, began to pray quickly, gabbling the words aloud and very fast. I waited a minute or two, thinking that perhaps he would rise from his knees in a more friendly state of mind, so that some kind of reconciliation might be effected between us—for I was full of a great pity for this young Tsar, in spite of my anger against him ; but he prayed on, turning to frown at me once or twice, and I judged at last that it would be wiser to leave him. He was still praying aloud as I quitted the room.

All the rest of that day and the next were spent by me in parading the streets of Moscow, looking for the flutter of a white kerchief at a window, but I found not what I had come to seek. I saw and spoke with many acquaintances, boyars and others, and of these I inquired whether any of the Krilos had been seen of late in Moscow. None of those I spoke with had met them, it appeared ; but there were rumours that they had been observed, and a further rumour that one of them had lately died ; but whether this was one of the three brothers, or the beautiful sister, was

unknown to my friends. I could have supplied the information. If I had thought of it I might also have deduced that possibly their wounds had made prisoners of Osip and Feodor Krilof, and this would account for the mystery of their invisibility during the last fortnight; for they had certainly entered Moscow; I had tracked them up to the gates of the city.

Moscow was in a curious condition just at this time. There had been, it was said, signs and portents of a coming visitation; though the superstitious, and these were many, differed as to the nature of the calamity foretold in the signs. Some said that a plague was imminent, such as had ravaged Moscow many years before; some inclined to the opinion that a fire would shortly break out and destroy the city; others declared that misfortunes were in store for the imperial family: perhaps in the death of the young Tsaritsa, who was known to be delicate. Again, there were many who gave out that the Tsar's grandmother, the mother of his own most blessed mother, Helen Glinsky, ~~was~~ a witch; and that, being angry by reason of the newly-begotten ascendancy of the Romanof family, which threatened to outweigh the influence of her own, she had vowed to visit her displeasure upon the city of Moscow. Shooting stars of great brilliance had burst over the city of late; strange birds had appeared croaking and fluttering upon the trees of the cemetery, and many other significant signs and

marvels had been observed. All Moscow wondered and waited to see what should happen.

I myself saw fifty meteors in a night, a sight I had never witnessed before ; and I beheld also another strange scene, which, though I am not by nature superstitious, filled me with awe and disquietude.

CHAPTER XVIII

SIGNS AND WONDERS

I saw a strange figure in the streets of Moscow ; it was broad daylight, and I myself decidedly in the possession of my senses. At first sight I thought it must be a supernatural visitation, so uncommon a spectacle was this ; but afterwards I was informed that Ivan Blajenny was a well-known figure in the town. He was naked, save for a scanty linen cloth about his loins, and when I first caught sight of him my thoughts instantly flew to John the Baptist, of whom he certainly reminded the beholder. It is said that this man went naked winter and summer, and preached repentance of sins to all, and eternal punishments to those who would not hear him.

I was attracted by the large crowd assembled outside the huge wooden Church of the Transfiguration, and on drawing near I beheld this strange Ivan Blajenny, who stood bowing and weeping before the church steps ; weeping aloud and groaning and beating his breast, but saying no word. The crowd, who knew him well and who looked upon him, some as a

godsmen (lunatic), some as a great prophet, were pale and haggard with consternation by reason of his behaviour; their minds were already somewhat unhinged by the numerous signs and portents of the last few days, and Ivan's unusual behaviour, in weeping instead of preaching, alarmed and disconcerted them.

As I stood watching and wondering what these things could mean, something happened which terrified the least superstitious of those around me, and which—I do not deny it—so startled me also that I fell on my knees with the rest and prayed aloud. The great bell of the church suddenly, and without warning of any kind, fell with a clang and a clash from the belfry, dashing through the gaily-painted roof of the church, and sending reverberations of startling clangour far and wide, as though all the bells of Moscow had heard its death-call and were answering in subdued lamentation.

I had not recovered my equanimity when I felt some one pushing past me as I knelt, and looking up I beheld the strange figure of Ivan Blajenny. He saw me and fixed his peculiar wild eyes upon my face.

'Stroganof! Stroganof!' he said excitedly, but scarcely above a whisper, 'Stroganof! the Tsar shall thank thee for his crown in the East; happy Stroganof, when these evil days are over! Listen, Stroganof! Thy sons shall sit with Tsars as their equals! but first there is woe—woe!' and the man was away and out of my sight before I had well caught what he said.

When I did realise the import of his words, I was not greatly impressed by them, though it seemed strange that he should have been acquainted with our venerable Perm prophecy, and should also have recognised me ; but since I was perhaps, during the bride-election, a well-known figure in Moscow, he might easily have learned my name at that time, and might also have heard the prophecy connected with our family.

As for the remark that my sons should sit with the Tsars as their equals, this, of course, was the mere raving of a madman, and I have never attached importance to the foolish words.¹

The crowd dispersed as Ivan disappeared, howling and beating their breasts : ‘ God is against us,’ was the burden of the lament ; ‘ there is misfortune in the air ! ’ I went on my way, like the rest ; but my heart was heavy within me, and I, too, felt that disaster overhung the city ; a sort of superstitious conviction of this appeared to have settled upon all minds.

All the rest of that day I wandered abroad, seeking for a sign of Vera’s hiding-place, but found no clue whatever, and I retired to my own home sad and depressed and completely baffled. I had offended and

¹ Ivan Blajenny nevertheless prophesied truly ; for in this century Count Stroganof, a commoner, actually married the sister of the then reigning Tsar, Alexander II., Maria Nicolaievna, daughter of the Emperor Nicholas, thus fulfilling, about three hundred years later, the prediction of the prophet of 1547. As for the realisation of the Perm prophecy, Alexander Stroganof shall describe this for himself.

finally quarrelled with the Tsar, my master, and I had lost my beloved princess ; no deeper vale of misery could exist for me.

But there were greater excitements in store both for me and for others on the following day—for me, indeed, such depths of terror and despair, that to this day I dare not allow my mind to dwell upon those horrible hours, but rather upon their happier outcome.

As I wandered from street to street, intent upon my unavailing search for Vera, I observed smoke arising from a point close at hand, and presently distinctly heard the crackle of burning wood. Men and women passed me hurriedly, crossing themselves and muttering, and heading for the spot whence came the indication of fire. I joined them and ran also, anxious to see the sight—terrible though the spectacle of a fire in daylight always is, shorn of the grandeur which surrounding darkness lends it, and visible only in the horrid destruction and ruin which it spreads abroad wherever its blighting grip is fastened. Then, to my surprise, I saw that it was that very Church of the Transfiguration which burned. The flames had taken firm hold upon its wooden walls and roof, which seemed to crumble away beneath its touch, the flames themselves scarcely visible in the bright June sunshine, but their deadly cancer-work all too plain to the eye. I watched the fire crackling and raging, and the people moaning and praying around me for some minutes, before I observed that Ivan Blajenny stood and preached

aloud from the farther corner of the roof of the burning church. I could not hear his denunciations, for the noise of the fire and of the crowd : but I could see him wave his arms, and raise his clasped hands to heaven, and again shake his fist over the city. Those of the crowd nearest to him shouted to him to come down while he might, but he took no notice of their words. Presently the flames came so close to him that I suppose they scorched him, for he uttered a shriek that was audible above all the noise around, and cast himself headlong into the midst of the blazing nave below, and no man ever saw trace of him again.

But this great church stood surrounded by houses and streets, and the buildings being all of wood and very dry with the summer sun, it was inevitable that some of the houses close at hand must catch fire. This happened long before the church had finished burning, and the air being calm, the flames caught in several directions at once. There was no water at hand, and though the crowds attempted to stay the spread of the conflagration by pulling the surrounding houses to pieces, they presently saw that their efforts were all in vain, and desisted from the work to weep aloud and cross themselves and to wonder at the wrath of the Almighty, searching about for causes and reasons for His displeasure.

Having adopted this line, the people soon gave birth to many theories, and it was significant that the common folk took no share of the responsibility for this

calamity upon their own shoulders, for their own sins ; but immediately pounced, as it were, upon the sore places of their betters, and wherever there was a known weakness in Tsar or boyars, they reminded one another of it and discussed it and the probable attitude of Providence towards such sins and sinners.

The Tsar, I could see, had not as yet lived down the unpopularity which the follies and extravagancies of his boyhood had saddled him withal, and many were the opinions expressed as to his past wickedness, and the probable wrath of God which now found expression in the calamity which threatened the city. Some of the boyars were also extremely unpopular, but more especially the Glinsky family—that is, the uncles and the grandmother of the Tsar, whose mother had been Helen Glinsky, a good woman and a worthy Tsaritsa, who died, unfortunately, when young Ivan Tsar was but eight years of age.

It appeared that the populace were angry with these Glinskys, because, having enjoyed every opportunity of bringing up the young Tsar well and as befitted his imperial state, they had used their position merely for purposes of self-aggrandisement, and had neglected their sacred duty to the youthful monarch, their natural charge and ward, and had allowed evil counsellors, such as Shuisky and the like, to become the depositaries of the real power in the State, and to ruin the Tsar's disposition by neglect and even cruelty and wicked counsels,

Thus two ideas took root at the beginning of this dreadful day among the superstitious, terrified throngs of the people; and when such ideas once become planted in the minds of our Russian peasantry, in moments of excitement, they spread as quickly and as terribly as the flames which were now creeping from house to house of this doomed city of Moscow.

Knowing this, it occurred to me at once to warn the Tsar, for it struck me that both he and his might be in danger before very long at the hands of the people.

I hastened therefore to the palace in the Kremlin, not without a faint hope that occasion might arise this day to show the Tsar who were his true friends, and to atone, if it might be, for the great offence I had put upon my master by my passionate and discourteous words on more than one occasion. As I hastened towards the palace I overtook a familiar figure, Adashef, speeding in the same direction. He looked harassed and thoughtful, but he smiled upon me with his usual sweet and friendly expression.

‘What, Stroganof!’ he cried cordially, ‘whither away so fast?’

‘I go to warn Ivan Vasilitch, Adashef,’ I said; ‘and I dare be sworn you too have seen the fire yonder, and the crowd, and have heard the foolish talk of the people, and are bound upon the same errand!’

‘You are right,’ he said seriously; ‘crowds are

evil things, like packs of wolves ; the Tsar is warned already. I sent a messenger, to bid him be ready to depart at a moment's notice, if I should return to advise him that this is necessary. It is necessary ; I shall persuade him to retire to Vorobief. Come you with me to his presence ; your stalwart form may be of service to-day, though I do not anticipate actual danger !'

Here was an enterprise after my own heart ! Oh, I thought, for an opportunity to lay about me among the Tsar's enemies, and for him to see me fight his battle ! He should talk no more of disloyalty after this !

Adashef could go where he pleased within the palace, and he led me straight to the Tsar's private apartment, which we entered without ceremony. There we beheld a curious sight.

Side by side upon the ground, on their knees before the *ikon* in the corner of the room, were the young Tsar and his beautiful Tsaritsa, the Romanof *boyarishnya* that was—the latter weeping and crossing herself and praying quietly with shut eyes ; the Tsar himself babbling his prayers audibly, repeating over and over again, so far as I could catch it, the response to the Litany '*Gospode, pomēloy*,' 'Lord, have mercy !' with exceeding rapidity, and crossing himself unceasingly. A third figure was present, that of an old and stately lady, whom I had frequently seen during my late stay in the capital. This was old Anna

Glinsky, the grandmother of the Tsar, as to whom there were many murmurings among the people this day, though I could never discover why she was set down by them as a witch, and as directly responsible for the fire ; yet this idea certainly became during the day the central conviction of the masses ; but as to this, I am anticipating.

Old Anna Glinsky knelt prostrate behind the other two, her forehead touching the ground. As we entered the room she turned and rose to her feet with a cry of terror, but seeing who we were, resumed her position of prostrate worship.

The Tsar also looked round, pausing an instant in his gabbling to do so. He glanced at Adashef and at me, frowning even at this agitating moment, as his eye met mine, and then returned to his devotions. The Tsaritsa prayed on without opening her eyes.

We stood and waited a minute, and another, and five more, and still the Tsar prayed on. Then Adashef took my arm and led me from the room. Outside he whispered to me that I had best make my way to Vorobief ; for the Tsar should not linger in Moscow if he (Adashef) could prevent it, and in half an hour he must be on his way to that country residence. At Vorobief I could be of great service in case of emergency.

As it appeared that my presence was neither desired nor required here, I withdrew, as Adashef suggested, with the intention to make all speed

from the city in the direction of the Tsar's country palace.

Just as I was on the point of leaving my companion, the Tsar opened the door of his room and put his head out.

'I am ready, Adashef,' he said. 'I have prayed to the Lord, and we shall be protected in the time of our need; you will see.' Then he frowned, seeing that I still stood with Adashef.

'What do you here?' he said angrily; 'do you not know that Moscow is burning? See that the tiger-cat does not burn also—do you hear me?' My brain reeled at the words. I had not thought of any danger to Vera in this fire. What if she were a prisoner, unable to escape, in some house which lay in the path of the destroyer! I staggered at the thought, and nearly fell.

'Go!' he added, stamping his foot at me; 'find her while you can! Find the brothers also, and send them to me; I have a mind to hang them—for I will have no tiger-cats in Moscow!'

'Oh, Tsar,' I groaned, in anguish of spirit, 'if you know where she is this day, for the love of God tell me, that I may indeed be assured that she is safe from this terror!' Ivan waxed furious at the words.

'I neither know nor care!' he shouted; 'what is this maiden to me? If she burn with her brothers and all their house, it is what they deserve and no more. Why do they bring this woman to Moscow? Let her burn, I say!—I have married an——'

'Tsar Ivan Vasilitch,' said Adashef, laying his hand upon his arm, 'let this boyar go to Vorobief, where he may be of use to us; it is time that we went. Listen!'

The Tsar listened and paled. Distinctly there came from the square without the sounds of a gathering multitude. 'It is true,' said Ivan. 'Stroganof,' he continued, turning again towards me, 'as God is in heaven, Osip Krilof was here this morning, and I refused to see him. I warned him to go hence. Does this satisfy thee? Before all the angels of heaven, Stroganof, I have treated thee better than I ever treated man before this day. Find her, or let her burn—what care I?' The Tsar laughed, frowned—turned and frowned again, and disappeared. My heart and brain were on fire as I hastened through the corridors and into the street.

But a fearful scene was enacting there; a scene that put for the moment out of my head even thoughts and fears for Vera's welfare.

CHAPTER XIX

MY PRINCESS

THE Great Uspensky Square, in front of the church of that name, was half full already of a howling, shouting mob of people; this much I saw, and ran back to warn the Tsar and his ladies. But Adashef had not wasted his moments, and I could find neither him nor his master. I therefore returned to the square, trusting that they had made good their retreat by another exit, and mixed with the mob in order to discover, if I could, what was the sense of the people, and what their grievance and intentions: whether, especially, it was the Tsar or the Glinskys who were the particular object of enmity to this mass of discontented humanity. Very soon I found, to my relief, that it was the Glinsky faction that was in disgrace. The reason astonished me: I heard it from the lips of one of the crowd, the centre of a circle of listeners, who ranted and talked for some moments before I could gather the meaning of his words—‘The hearts of Christian people, whom she has first murdered’—he was saying—‘and boiled them down; and

with the water from this hellish stew she has sprinkled the streets of Moscow; and wherever she has done this the fire is spreading or will spread. They are enchanters and witches, these Glinskys, every one of them !'

'Down with the Glinskys !' cried a dozen voices.

'Yes, down with them indeed !' continued the orator; 'they have destroyed Moscow and corrupted the young Tsar—down with the Glinskys, or he too will become an enchanter and boil the hearts of Christian people. But, above all, down with Anna Glinsky, the arch-enchantress !'

'Down with all of them, every one !' cried someone. 'Who knows the Glinskys by sight ?'

'I know Yuri,' said one.

'And I know Ivan,' said another; 'and, of course, Anna Yegorovna !'

'Then watch for them, for they are sure to come before long,' said the first speaker, 'and when each one comes seize him immediately, and—you know how to deal with such people; the fire will not burn itself out until we have finished with Anna and her devil-whelps !'

'Rope or stones ?' shouted someone, 'or plain sticks ?'

'Yes, yes; that or anything, stones or swords—their own swords, if you like; only let them be wiped out.'

Just at this moment a boyar strode quickly into

the square, making for the palace ; I knew him at once ; it was Yuri Glinsky, the Tsar's uncle. He evidently suspected nothing of the disturbance or of his own danger, for he went proudly, as usual, disdaining the plebeian throng, and neither thinking of them nor listening to them.

'See, there goes one of them !' cried someone.
'It is Yuri Glinsky.'

'He is right ; it is one of the accursed !' cried another.

'Down with him !' shouted a dozen voices ; 'down with all the Glinskys !'

Yuri could not now fail to observe the menacing aspect of the crowd ; he started and flushed, and was about to speak, when a stone struck him in the chest. He was close to the door of the Uspensky Church, and he darted into it for sanctuary.

But a dozen or more of the crowd darted in after him, and a moment later these reappeared, dragging their victim between them. Instantly he was despatched, and his body hacked into a thousand little pieces, which were straightway trampled into the dust of the square.

'Well done, brothers, well done !' cried the agitator, who, I observed, took no part in the actual performance of this swift but terrible tragedy ; 'there is one of the devil's brood accounted for ! Now watch for Ivan—and then we will demand Anna herself—the arch-fiend !'

That ‘watching’ for Ivan Glinsky proved fatal to several unfortunate boyars who, if not innocent persons themselves, at all events were not Glinskys. A young Kojin was caught and killed, by mistake; so also was a Sheremetieff, and young Ignatief, whom I knew by sight, all his protests being unavailing because some one in the crowd declared that he was Ivan Glinsky. Then a fourth mistake was nearly made. I thank the Most Merciful that I was enabled to prevent it, for otherwise—but let me describe what happened.

Watching, as I was—like the rest—the top of the square, I suddenly beheld a boyar enter among the throng of people still crowding in, whose face at the distance that separated us seemed remarkably familiar. It was, I saw at once, either Osip Krilof, Vera’s eldest brother, or someone so like him that they might be mistaken one for the other. As he drew nearer I became more and more certain that this was indeed Osip and no other, and the discovery so excited me that I began to struggle towards him through the crowd, and grasped him tightly by the arm as I came near enough to do so, shouting—perhaps involuntarily—that I had found him at last and shaking him, in my fury and agitation, as a cat would a mouse. This fury of mine the crowd misinterpreted, and a cry was instantly raised that here was a Glinsky. Half a score of rough hands laid hold of him in a moment, and a score of stones were raised to hurl at his head.

'Stop, idiots,' I shouted, shaking off those whose hands were already upon him; 'this is no more a Glinsky than I am. You have murdered three innocent men, is not that enough for you ?'

'May be you're a Glinsky yourself!' shouted someone, and the cry was taken up by two or three. One fellow laid his hand upon me; I stretched him at my feet with a blow of the fist.

'Do the Glinskys strike like that?' I asked, 'and am I of the age of the Glinskys? They are men of forty and more; I am scarcely eighteen. I am Stroganof—let me alone, fools, and this man also; he is a Krilof, a stranger in Moscow like myself, and has nothing to do with the Glinskys.'

'His name is Stroganof, right enough,' cried someone—and I was grateful indeed to my unknown friend—'for I heard the godsmen, Ivan Blajenny, call him so yesterday. I don't know about the other—he may be a Glinsky, but he looks fully young for one of that litter!'

Luckily another unfortunate now entered the square, and attention was centred upon him, we apparently having successfully passed through the ordeal; and I took the opportunity of dragging my man out of the Kremlin enclosure and into a quiet street. The roar of the crowds continued upon our right hand; upon the left, the flame and smoke of a thousand burning houses looked like the very pit of hell, and the shouts and shrieks that came up from the

blackness and glare might have been the voices of the lost spirits.

'Come,' I said, 'where is she? Quickly—is she in danger from the fire?—that first!'

'Before God—no!' said Osip, who looked half dead with terror, 'or I should not be here!'

'Then lead me to her at once,' I said, still retaining my hold upon his arm, 'and the quicker we go the better chance for thee that I spare thy life!'

'My life?' he said, 'but what if I take yours? And what if I refuse altogether to lead you to my sister?'

'Then, Osip,' I said, 'I take you back to the Uspensky Square, and you are Ivan Glinsky again; I have seen four Ivan Glinskys cut up into a thousand pieces this day, and trampled in the dust.' I could see Osip tremble, and his face was the colour of ash; but the Krilos have spirit, and he showed as bold a front as he could.

'If you were a man,' he said, 'you would fight me fair, here and now; but you are a coward and threaten me with the mob.'

'Very well,' I replied; 'then I am a coward—for the present. I will fight you fair afterwards, if need be—though I shall certainly kill you, Osip, if we fight. But for the present I am a coward, and you shall lead me to Vera; now march!'

'I will not,' said he, setting his face.

'Very well, Ivan Glinsky,' I said, 'then ho! for

the Uspensky !' and with the words I dragged him towards the Kremlin ; I was three times as strong as he, and he knew it, though he struggled.

'Stop,' he said, 'and let go ; I will take you to Vera.'

'Spoken like a wise man,' said I ; 'it is better to be Osip Krilof in one piece than Ivan Glinsky in a thousand ! Lead on !'

Through big and little streets we went, now almost within the smoke and heat of the fire and half choked with the horrid fumes ; now leaving these, as well as the roar of the flames and the shouts and shrieks of the population far behind us, until at last we were in the very outskirts of the city and at no great distance from that very Vorobief to which the Tsar was to fly, or had already retreated. Here, standing alone in the midst of a tangled garden, was an old wooden *dacha*, or country house, and there—sure enough—as I gazed up at the windows : there, from one of these at the top of the house, fluttered the promised white handkerchief.

My poor Vera, how should I ever have found her but for the accident of the Glinsky riot ! She might well have stayed on here for the full two years and I should never have discovered her !

I had spoken no word to Osip during the whole length of our walk, nor he to me, neither did I now ; but I pushed him before me up the stairs, he haggard with fury and perhaps with shame, I haggard also

with fury and with eagerness to behold once again my beloved princess.

The door was locked from outside. Osip unlocked it without a word, and returned down the stairs. I neither thought nor cared what had become of him; I only knew that I had found my betrothed, and that she was folded once again in my arms.

When I descended the stairs, presently, with Vera, Osip was waiting for us at the bottom with drawn sword; I drew mine also.

'Now,' he said, 'to the garden!' I would have dissuaded him, but he would not hear of it, though he knew he had no chance against me.

'Be content, Osip, and go back to Kamka, you and Feodor,' I said; 'I would not shed your blood.'

'But I will shed yours,' said he, 'if I can; come, defend!'

There was no help for it. 'I will not slay him outright, Vera,' I whispered. Vera was very pale, but her face was set and firm.

'He is in your hands, and God's,' she said.

'Stay here, my soul, and trust me!' I whispered back, and then I went into the garden, and we set to in earnest.

Osip did his best, but in two minutes I had him breathless and at mercy. 'I can kill you now, Osip,' I said, 'and if I thought you would have sold your sister this day to the Tsar, I would!'

'The Krilofs do not even imagine such things,' he panted.

I am certain that Osip Krilof spoke only the truth.

'Then why are you in Moscow, and why was she locked up, and why did you visit the Tsar this day?' I asked, fencing languidly to give him breath. Neither of us were accomplished swordsmen, but I was stronger and had a quicker eye than he, and was also in better condition.

'To the first two questions I answer, in order to keep her safe from meddling and undesired suitors; as for my visit to the Tsar, he saw me and sent for me!'

'Oh!' I said, surprised; 'and then refused to see you?'

'That is true,' said Osip, flushing. We fenced a little while in silence.

'Now, Krilof, will you shake hands upon the past, and go hence where you will?' I cried at last.

'What, with the man who slew my brother? Not I,' said Osip; 'do your worst.'

'My worst I will not do,' I said, 'but if you must have the point, the point you shall have!' and I drove my man backwards till I could plant my weapon where I would, which was in the upper portion of his sword-arm. He dropped his sword with a cry and leant against a tree. I would have bound his wound for him, but he waved me off savagely.

'If you will not,' I said, 'then you will not; I can do no more!' and with these words I bowed and departed.

I reassured Vera as to the well-being of Osip, and then we two set out for Vorobief, for I was obliged to take her with me, having nowhere else to leave her.

There were many others, I found, also on the way to Vorobief, and among these I soon recognised, to my astonishment and consternation, the agitator of the Uspensky Square. He being here, I concluded, the real Ivan Glinsky must have been caught and killed ; and now he is on the way to Vorobief to demand Anna Glinsky at the Tsar's hands, even as he threatened. The mob must then have sought the Tsar at the Kremlin, and found him flown. Good Adashef ! Naturally only a very small proportion of the Kremlin crowd had followed the ringleader so far out as this ; but there was a mob quite sufficiently large to be significant, and—since it consisted, naturally, of the bolder and more savage spirits—dangerous.

In the courtyard at Vorobief, two or three hundred noisy persons assembled, and commenced to shout as soon as they arrived, hammering also at the doors and lower windows of the house in which the Tsar lived, and in which he was actually ensconced at that very moment, both he and the 'Enchantress,' Anna Glinsky, whose name was on the lips of the turbulent people.

As for me, I stood on the fringe of the crowd nearest the palace ; for in case of emergency my place must, of course, be at the Tsar's side. I bade Vera keep farther back, and hide her face as much as

possible, for it was just as well that the Tsar should not see her, if, as was likely enough to be the case, he was even now watching us all from an upper window. I feared that the mob might, in a moment of fury and excitement, break open the door and flow like a flood throughout the building, slaying whomsoever they met—Tsar, or boyar, or boyarina. If they did so, I should endeavour to be the first in, and to hold the stairs.

But while I waited and revolved all this with beating heart, a memorable and wonderful thing happened—a thing which renewed and revived all my love and admiration for my young but most imperial master, if, indeed, that love and admiration had ever really failed, in spite of our repeated disagreements and quarrels.

CHAPTER XX

FLIGHT

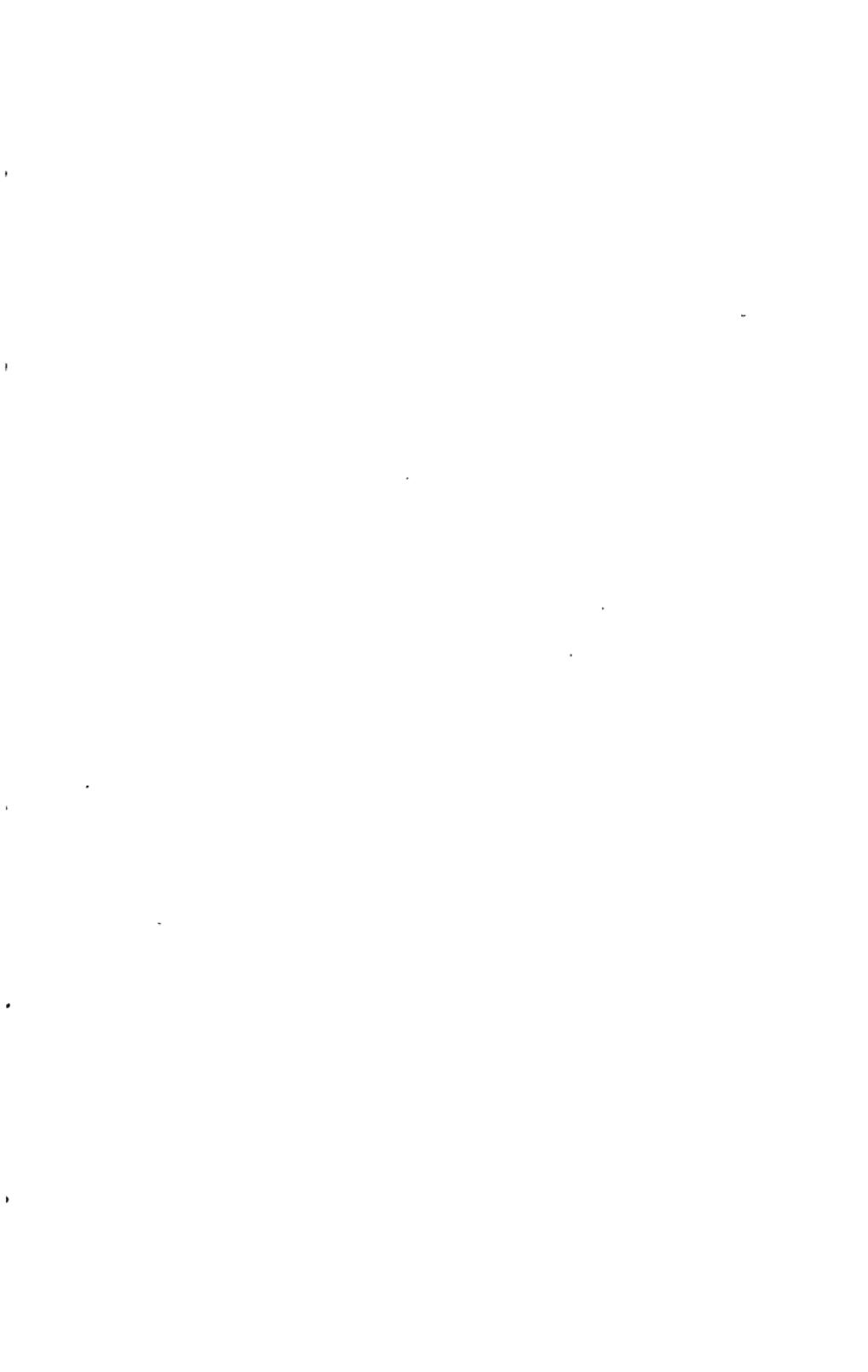
IN a word, the door suddenly opened wide, and out walked the young Tsar himself, his face pale with anger, but instinct with majesty; unarmed, excepting for the usual spiked staff, but attired in a magnificent kaftan as though for a state reception. Behind him were Nikita Romanof, the brother of the Tsaritsa, and Adashef. His falcon eyes ranged over the crowd very haughtily; but happily they observed only generally and not particularly, and both I and Vera escaped notice. The Tsar looked marvellously young and boyish, for all his majesty.

'Well,' he said, 'my children, what means this noise and tumult ?'

Several voices in the crowd shouted 'Anna Glinsky ! we demand Anna Glinsky !'

'Indeed ?' said the young Tsar, very haughtily, 'you demand Anna Glinsky, the august grandmother of your Sovereign; and why do you demand at my hands this gracious and august lady ?'

'She has murdered the orthodox and boiled their hearts in water !' cried one or two.





**Without a thought of the consequences I turned suddenly and
felled the man**

'And with that water she has sprinkled the streets of Moscow, thus causing the fire !' cried others.

'She is a witch and a devil !' shrieked one enthusiast; 'we will cut her in pieces and thus save you from her, Ivan Vasilitch, whether you will or no !'

'Indeed, is it so, my children ?' said the Tsar, preserving his composure marvellously, considering his passionate spirit. 'Go back, then, to your homes, and save your goods and your children from the fire. The Almighty has sent this infliction for your own sins, not for any misdeeds of the great lady whose name you pollute by uttering it; go home, I say, before I reconsider my mercy towards you !'

But some of the people, encouraged by my friend the agitator from the Kremlin, still shouted 'Anna Glinsky, we will have the witch ! Let her be thrown down to us ! We will not depart without her !'

Then asserted himself the real Ivan. 'You dogs !' he shrieked, flushing red with rising passion; 'must I drive you away with my own hands ?'

Someone at my elbow cried, 'Down with the grandson of the witch !' I, without a thought of the consequences, turned instantly and felled the man. Adashev and Romanof stepped in front of the Tsar, drawing their swords; Ivan pushed them angrily aside; some of the crowd began to sneak out of the yard; all fell back a pace or two, all excepting my fallen friend. I had struck him with my fist only, but he lay still, breathing stertorously, and unconscious.

Ivan stepped forward, as though to mingle with the crowd ; his face was white, with one red spot in each cheek ; his eyes wore their wildest expression.

‘ Let another man say “ Down with the Tsar ! ” ’ he shouted. No one spoke.

‘ What, only one traitor among you all ? ’ he said witheringly, ‘ or many cowards ? Let another man cry “ Down with Anna Glinsky ! ” ’ Still no one spoke.

‘ Good ; then you may go,’ said the Tsar, ‘ most of you ; a few will stay behind. I have seen who are the offenders ; step out, you sir,’ he continued, addressing the agitator, the real ringleader of the mob. ‘ I have observed your energy, which must be tamed ; you are dissatisfied, is it not so ? ’ As though without design, the Tsar brought his spike down, pinning the wretched man’s foot to the ground. He yelled and shrieked with the pain of it ; most of the crowd took alarm instantly and retired like a flock of sheep. I saw Vera leave the yard among the rest, and signed to her to wait outside, for I longed to make my peace with the Tsar.

But not all of the mob were allowed to depart. The Tsar’s wonderful eye seemed to have marked every one of those who had constituted themselves the mouthpieces of the rest, and each of these was stopped and detained by his orders. What became of them and of the ringleader I never learned. My victim still lay groaning on the ground, and was removed with the rest, still unconscious.

The Tsar stood talking with Adashef. He looked over his shoulder once or twice, and scowled at me ; this disappointed me greatly, for though my service had been of the smallest, yet I had hoped that, such as it was, he would have accounted it a virtue. Adashef came and spoke to me, presently, seeing that I still lingered ; the Tsar was unaccountably angry with me, he said, and would prefer it if I withdrew without waiting for an audience. There was, therefore, nothing to be done, and I prepared to depart. As I neared the entrance to the courtyard, however, hearing footsteps behind me, I turned, and saw the Tsar following me. He looked pale and careworn and signed to me to stop ; the boyars had remained behind.

'I see you have found her, after all,' he said, and I could distinctly see him tremble with agitation as he spoke. He glanced at the gate of the yard. 'Is the *boyarishnya* well ?'

Nothing, then, had escaped that hawk-eye !

'Perfectly well, your Highness !' I said ; 'she was a prisoner ; I found Osip Krilof and compelled him to release her.'

'Where is Osip Krilof ?' asked the Tsar, in a curious, hungry-like manner.

I told him where I had found Vera.

'And she is well ?' repeated Ivan.

'Well, and beautiful as ever,' I said foolishly.

'She was certainly beautiful,' the Tsar rejoined,

musingly; ‘as beautiful as the splendour of the morning. And now,’ he continued, ‘you will take her to Perm—and marry her?’

‘Yes,’ I said; ‘and marry her.’

‘Marry whom you will,’ said the Tsar, growing a shade paler; ‘what is it to me?’

‘It is nothing to thee, Tsar Ivan Vasilitch,’ I said boldly, looking him in the eyes. He flushed and stamped, and I feared for a moment that his present placable temper might change for the worse; but he controlled himself.

‘It is this to me,’ he said, ‘that, having married this woman, thou shalt never look upon my face again; nor I on thine, or on hers.’

‘That must be as God wills, Tsar Ivan Vasilitch,’ I said; ‘who knows, there may come a day when I shall have deserved so well of thee, that all this will be forgotten and forgiven!’

‘Never, Stroganof; assure yourself of that,’ he said earnestly; ‘you are to choose now and for ever; nay, you need not speak; the choice is made already. I know it well! Now go, and go quickly; and God forgive thee and me that which we do or design amiss!’ The Tsar embraced me—I felt a wondrous love and pity for him at this moment; but I knew that his mood would change, and that I could not count upon his favour, even this much of it, from hour to hour, therefore I said nothing.

‘Now go,’ he repeated, ‘lest I suddenly kill thee,

Sasha.' My eyes were full of tears as I prepared to leave him. 'Stay,' he said, 'is she here at hand? Nay, I know she is; I feel it——.'

'She waits without,' I said.

'Then fetch her, Sasha, that I may bid her farewell,' he said, and I could see that his hands were all a-tremble, and his lips twitched convulsively. 'And—stay—' he added, 'let me tell you this, Sasha, when you go away, you and she, now, I mean, after this, take horses and ride, and, for the love of God, and for the sake of your own love, ride quickly. Do you understand me? Ride quickly, as though the devil were after you!'

'I understand,' I said.

'Now bring her to me, bring her to me; I will see her once again,' he said hoarsely, 'and then perhaps no more.'

I went in search of Vera, and found her close at hand. She was surprised and somewhat agitated to hear that the Tsar desired to bid her farewell; but I reassured her, telling her of his marvellously softened mood, and conducted her back to the courtyard.

But when we reached the place at which I had left the Tsar, the yard was empty, and I saw no trace of Ivan.

'Come away, Sasha,' said Vera; 'come away, quickly; it is better so.' And then, as we hurried back to Moscow, my princess told me that she had caught sight of the Tsar's face, half hidden, at a

window, and that she was startled at the paleness of it.

The city of Moscow was at this time a terrible sight. Through the city in several directions ran wide pathways of ruin and desolation, and the flames still continued their onward march. Wherever the eye rested there was the same horrid spectacle of blazing, smoking ruins, and of weeping men and wailing women and shrieking children. The hand of God lay heavy indeed upon Moscow on that dread day of wrath, and it is said that a full half of the city was burned down during this and the following days. We ourselves saw, as we passed, the Krilof mansion on fire, but did not stay to watch the destruction. My own, or rather our family house, still stood, but the servants were busy removing valuables in carts and on horseback, with the intention of carrying everything worth the trouble to a small estate which we own near the Troitsky Monastery. Luckily there were still horses in the stable, and my princess and I lost no time in selecting the two most promising of these and mounting them; and so, with scarce a moment's delay, we started upon our long ride, for I remembered the Tsar's words, and understood well enough that Ivan knew his own disposition, and that he would act as his passion dictated when in the evil mood.

Therefore we rode fast and spared not our horses, and when night fell—the animals still having a measure of strength in them—we did not stop to

rest, but rode on until they could run no farther. I had told Vera of the Tsar's warning, and she had flushed and then laughed, and said that she never liked the Tsar so well as for that speech.

'But,' she had added, 'I shall love him the better for every mile that we can place between him and us!'

When the horses were tired out, Vera's spirit still upheld her; but she was very weary, for all her spirit, and I was glad to reach a village which contained the house of a boyar well-known to me; and though he himself was absent in Moscow, his servants received us—as they would have received any others of boyar rank that demanded hospitality—and I had the unspeakable bliss of reflecting that my princess was safe and free, and—better than this—resting peacefully under the same roof as I, and under my own protection. Nor man nor devil, I said to myself, should tear her from me again. In which blessed assurance I too fell asleep, and rested right well, for, in truth, I had had a fatiguing day.

On the following morning we were up and off again, and—since there is little to relate of this rapid retreat until we reached Ruchief, excepting that we rode almost night and day until we approached that blessed village—it may as well be said at once that we galloped safely up to the porch of our good priest's house, he being overjoyed to see us together and safe, and that by this holy man my princess and I were

duly, though hurriedly, united in those sacred bonds of union which even Tsars cannot loosen if they would. But though, by the mercy of the Highest, we thus attained the summit of our desires and the supremacy of happiness, yet we were not by any means quit of our troubles and the dangers of the retreat.

We had seen nothing of any pursuers up to this point, and I had begun to be quite sanguine as to the permanent reform in the Tsar's disposition.

'His benevolence has lasted, Vera, for once!' I said. Vera shook her head.

'I do not trust his benevolence,' she said; 'he is two men in one, and never either for long. He will have regretted his kindness after an hour of benevolence, and when the other humour came, in its turn, he probably sent an armed party after us. And if not he, then my brothers. We must not delay, Sasha, my soul; let us ride on!'

Vera was right. Even though the Tsar had remained kind—which was unlikely—her brothers would leave no stone unturned to assemble a party and pursue us most relentlessly.

'Shall I tell you what I think of the Tsar in this matter, Vera?' I said, as we rode gaily together, man and wife now, and light of heart and joyous as the birds that sang around us this glorious day in early July.

'What?' she said, laughing; 'that he is like a

spoilt child that would have all the toys to play with and the rest none ? '

' Nay—rather that he is to be pitied and loved for what he has done and felt.'

' And what is that ? ' asked Vera, blushing a little.

' He has seen my princess,' I replied gallantly, ' and that is the same as saying that he loves her.'

' Nay,' said Vera, flushing more deeply, ' it is the Romanof that he loves ; can a man love two women at once ? '

' I cannot,' I said ; ' but upon my soul it looks as though a Tsar can. Do you think he loves the Romanof ? '

' Certainly,' said Vera, ' in one way.'

' And thee in another ? '

' If you will have it so,' said she, ' me in another. Perhaps her with his good self, and me with the evil ; who knows ? He is a double man, two men in one, all who know him are aware of that.'

This was a novel theory indeed.

' And which loves the more, the good Ivan or the evil Ivan ? ' I asked, laughing.

' I think we will speak of something else,' she said ; ' I am tired of the Tsar for a subject.'

' But, seriously, my soul,' said I, ' I am full of great pity for this young Tsar ; for, who knows ? it is possible that he has made a great sacrifice ; such a sacrifice as I—had I been in his place—could never have made. If I were to tell you my honest opinion

of Ivan and his loves, I should be obliged to say that this Ivan-lover which loves the Tsaritsa is a pigmy compared with the giant-lover Ivan that loves thee !'

'And if I am to be as truthful as thou,' said Vera, looking straight into my eyes with her own superb, fearless orbs ; 'if I am to be as truthful as thou, my soul, I must say I think thy words are right. I know what I know. And therefore, I say, let us ride on and delay not !'

CHAPTER XXI

THE FIGHT ON THE STAIRS

As we journeyed on day after day towards the Kama and our home, we became more and more sanguine that we were after all to be allowed to reach our destination without interference ; and we were already safely across the Viatka river and a day's journey beyond before the storm broke over us. As a matter of fact, we had travelled very fast up to Ruchief, so fast that I doubted whether there existed another maiden in all Russia who could have ridden so far in the time as my Vera did ; but Vera was ever as much at home on horseback as upon her own feet, and had been accustomed to gallop over field and forest from her earliest infancy. But from Ruchief onwards we had ridden somewhat more easily, and thus gave our enemies the opportunity to overtake us, though we had up to this time handsomely outstripped our pursuers.

We had claimed *noch-liog*, or a night's rest, at the house of a boyar at about a day's ride from the Viatka river at Oordjoom. This boyar—Katkof by

name—received us somewhat unwillingly, and I had more than a mind to ride on and find a less churlish host farther afield, but that Vera was tired with the hot sun and the dust of the plains we had crossed during the day. So we stayed on and made the best of accommodation unwillingly bestowed and of a supper of black bread and salted *soodak* from the Viatka, washed down with the *kvass* of the country, a sickly drink beloved by the peasants, but seldom, I am glad to say, placed before boyars.

As we sat at supper with our churl of a host, there came the sound of horses ridden swiftly, and a cavalcade consisting, to judge from the noise of the hoofs, of a large number of mounted men, approached the house. The night was hot and the windows open, so that it was easy to hear and distinguish every word that was said outside.

‘Stop here !’ cried a voice I recognised at once. ‘I will not ride another yard ; get down, Feodor, and claim the *noch-liog*.’

I glanced at Vera—she was pale as milk, and her hand trembled for one moment ; she had recognised the speaker as I had ; it was her brother Osip. Then came a great hammering at the door, and the voice of our host grumbling and cursing in the corridor without.

‘Tell them to go back to the village, or to go to the devil,’ said he to the serf who went to open the door. ‘We have one party here already, and no room

for more ; I cannot give the *noch-liog* to all the Tsar's boyars at once.'

I dragged Vera swiftly out of the door and up the winding wooden stair to the upper storey. At the top of the stairs I took my stand, placing my princess behind me. Vera was armed with dagger and pistol ; I had insisted upon her carrying both. I had sword and dagger, but no pistol.

Meanwhile an altercation proceeded downstairs. I heard the serf give his master's message, couched in politer terms, and I heard the reply, in Feodor Krilof's voice, inquiring what the party consisted of that had already claimed the night-shelter, and the serf's again, describing us. Then Feodor and Osip consulted in tones which did not reach me ; and presently Osip bade the serf fetch his master, which the man did.

The old boyar, alarmed at the size of the party, was all courtesy and graciousness. He would gladly, he said, accommodate all, but he was a poor man, though a boyarin, and his house was small, and two persons had already claimed hospitality this night.

'Then first show us these persons,' said Osip, 'and if they prove to be those we seek, we will relieve you both of their company and of our own.'

To this the boyar replied with alacrity that if they had authority to take these persons by force, they might do so and welcome, for all he cared ; but if

they were without authority, how could he commit the sin of breach of hospitality ?

' As to that,' said Osip, ' you are right ; but we carry the Tsar's *ookaz*, which overrides the laws of the *noch-liog*.'

' The Tsar's *ookaz* ! ' repeated our host, ' then come in, in Heaven's name ; my house is yours and all that is in it ! '

' Not quite all, boyar ! ' I shouted from the top of the stairs. ' We two are not his just yet. Come up and fetch us, Osip, if you desire us ! ' I glanced at Vera, her eyes were ablaze and her cheeks flushed ; she threw her arms about me and kissed me passionately. ' Yes, yes ! ' she said, ' let them come ! '

There was a long silence downstairs, and then much whispering, in which our host took his share, a fact which I remembered afterwards, and presently Osip Krilof came up the stairs alone ; we could hear his steps mounting towards us before he came in sight, the stairs being circular ; at last he appeared.

He took no notice of me, but spoke to my princess.

' Vera,' he said, ' come down ; it is the *ookaz* of the Tsar.'

' Here is my Tsar,' said Vera, ' and him I obey.'

' Would you then disobey our Sovereign ? ' continued her brother ; ' and as for this man, he is no Tsar, but a traitor boyar whom I have authority to slay like a dog.' I laughed aloud.

' Can a woman then disobey her husband ? ' said

Vera ; ‘ and as for this man, he is no traitor, but a better man than you, Osip, my brother ; and as for slaying him, why you have tried it before, little soul ; see that he does not slay you instead ! ’

‘ Do you tell me that you have married a Stroganof ? ’ said Osip, trembling with rage. ‘ Tell me, you have not yet done this, Vera ! ’

‘ I have both done it, and rejoice to have done it,’ said my beautiful wife.

Osip reeled and leant against the stair-rail, but he spoke with spirit, though cruelly.

‘ I should curse thee,’ he said, ‘ but that it matters little ; for when we have cut this husband of thine to pieces and cast him to the dogs, thou shalt obey the Tsar, sweet widow-sister ! ’

‘ Osip,’ I cried, mad with rage, ‘ for that speech you shall die.’

‘ Perhaps,’ he said ; ‘ I care not whether my sister’s husband slay one or two, or all of her brothers, since she has disgraced herself by marrying the murderer of one ! ’

‘ Osip,’ said Vera, ‘ thou art a coward and a liar, though my brother. Is it murder to defend oneself, when five men fall upon one man ? ’

‘ He is guilty of thy brother’s blood,’ replied Osip, somewhat confusedly, ‘ that should be enough for a dutiful sister ! ’

‘ Come, an end of this ! ’ I cried, stamping my foot ; ‘ go down and fetch your friends, and let us

begin this comedy ; how many swords are there to one this time ? '

' That you shall see soon enough ! ' said Osip, flushing red, and with the words he turned and went down.

' Oh, my love,' whispered Vera, ' it is hard that it should come to this, that thou must shed my brothers' blood, or they thine ! ' Poor Vera's eyes were full of tears.

' Be comforted, sweet soul,' I said, ' I will die rather than slay a second of your brothers ; I spoke in anger —they are safe.'

' Nay, if it come to that,' said Vera, weeping, ' you shall not die, my Sasha ; for I myself will slay them rather than they thee ! ' I kissed her and laughed, and said that perhaps, by the mercy of the Highest, we might yet escape without the blood-shedding of either husband or brothers ; but after this we had no more time for speaking, for the attack began, and for a short while I was somewhat busy and found little leisure for speech.

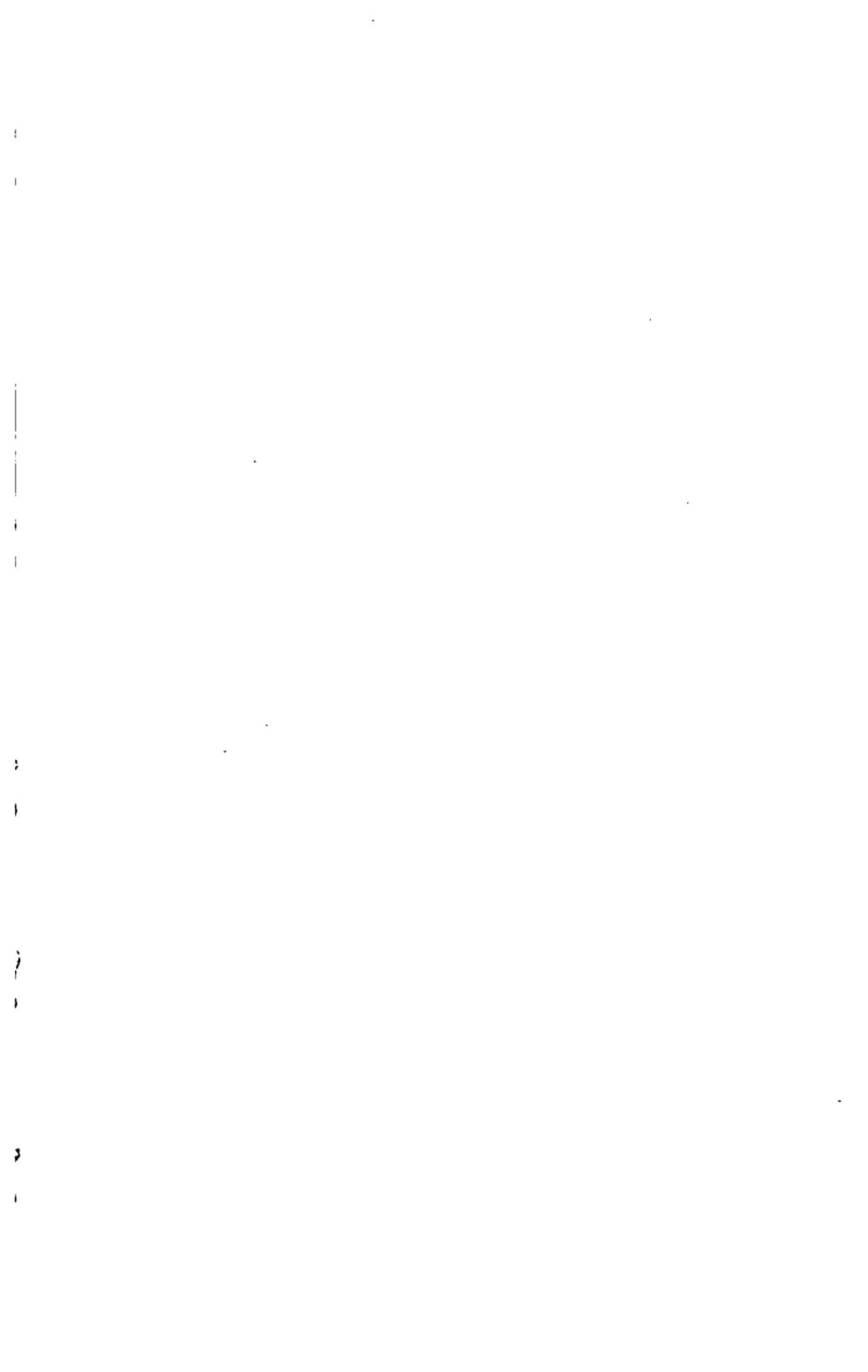
The stairs were wide enough for two men abreast, but scarcely wide enough for both to fight comfortably. I have said that at this time I was a mere tyro in the art of swordsmanship. In after years I achieved great reputation as a swordsman, and became, I may say it without vanity, the most accomplished fencer in the Tsar's dominions, thanks to the instruction which I received in the art during my sojourn in England, to

which country I returned with the Englishman Chancellor and again with Jenkinson, both these great explorers and travellers (good and brave men, both), being, at that time, intimate friends of mine. But now, at the age of eighteen, I was a mere hacker with the sword, like all my countrymen—only, being dowered by the Almighty with muscles like the hoop-bands of a cask, and with the chest of a bull, I could hack harder than most. So then, this hacking-match began, and began well ; for first of all came Osip Krilof and another, and having sliced that other almost in two halves, I seized him and hurled his body full at Osip's head, and both Osip and he tumbled out of sight downstairs, to the confusion of those that stood below them. Feodor Krilof next appeared and hacked bravely at me, for Feodor, like the rest, had plenty of spirit ; but I easily knocked the sword from his hand, and with my foot suddenly raised to his chest, sent him flying after Osip.

Then came a mixed host of young boyars, some of whom I knew by sight, and serf-soldiers, many of whom I killed or wounded, and one of whom just grazed my arm with his weapon. The chances of the battle were all in my favour, for I had the advantage of position ; and, besides this, my enemies were unable to fight conveniently, for each man hampered his neighbour, and my opponents scolded and swore at one another as they fought, while I laughed and mocked at them.

But suddenly the battle took a new turn. When

we had fought for five minutes, I was startled by a sudden cry from Vera, and at the same moment, looking round, I just swerved in time to escape a lunge from one of two men who had somehow come upon us from the rear. This was, of course, by the treachery of our host, who had shown how this could be effected; and the attack from behind was part and parcel of the plan of operation. At the same instant, the second man threw himself with all his weight against me and precipitated me head first down the stairs. Two men, against whom I collided, fell with me and we struggled furiously together on the wooden steps, those behind digging at me with their swords and wounding sometimes me and sometimes their own friends, but neither seriously, for they dared not strike hard for fear of slaying their own. In an instant, or little more, I was upon my feet again and laying about me right lustily, for my sword-arm was as yet untouched, and as I rose I heard Vera's pistol explode, and a man came tumbling down the steps, almost knocking me off my feet. I rushed upwards, frantic with alarm for Vera, but as I sped someone threw a dagger from behind which fixed itself in the flesh of my sword-arm, and when I instinctively tried to raise my left arm to draw it forth, I found that I could not move that limb, which had been wounded during my struggle on the ground. But, to my joy, Vera was safe and unhurt. The second of the two





Vera picked up my sword and dared them, dagger in one hand and
sword in the other

men who had attacked me from the rear lay writhing in his death-agony, pierced by her dagger. Vera was panting and pale, but smiled and said :

‘ They tried to drag me away behind there, but—Holy Mother of the Most Blessed, my Sasha, what ails you ? you are pale ! ’

‘ It is nothing ! ’ I said ; and then, Vera tells me, I fainted.

For the rest of the story of this battle I am indebted to Vera’s account, which I have at different times and with great difficulty—by reason of her modesty—extracted from her.

After I fainted and fell against the stair-rail—and before those of my foes who still remained capable of the exertion could get at me to despatch me—Vera picked up my sword, and stood between me and them and dared them, the dagger in one hand and the sword in the other. The men laughed and bade her get out of the way lest hurt befel her.

‘ And what will the Tsar say, then ? ’ said Vera, whereupon the fellows laughed no more.

Then Vera wound her arms about me and dragged me downstairs, placing her body ever between mine and the swords of those who looked threateningly, saying that as heaven was above her, if any blow were aimed, it should strike herself and not me ; and these men, knowing well that the Tsar’s most terrible wrath would assail all if evil should befall this princess, dared not strike.

And so Vera conveyed me—half carrying and half dragging—down the stairs, past five dead bodies and several wounded ones, and past her own brothers Osip and Feodor, both wounded and sitting groaning on the steps, into the open air, and across the road into the forest, where she laid me down and bathed my temples with water from a moss pool. Here I soon revived, and was able to count and see to my wounds, of which there were no less than nine, though none very serious. Vera washed them one and all, and bound them with pieces of her own and my garments, and within half an hour I was able, though stiff and in much pain, to crawl with my beloved deeper into the heart of the forest, so that we might feel secure, at least for the present, from our cruel persecutors. There were not more than three or four, Vera said, capable of sallying forth to look for us, and these were probably too busy looking after the wounds of their own people to have much time to spare for us. They had watched us into the wood, however, said Vera, and doubtless relied upon my wounded condition to easily find us whenever they should think fit to start in search.

This, we both thought, would be to-morrow morning at latest

CHAPTER XXII

YERMAK

FORTUNE favoured us on this weary and painful night. Determined to reach what we calculated would be a safe distance from our pursuers, we wandered together through the dark pines, Vera supporting me—for I was weak with loss of blood and in much pain—and by the merest accident (if indeed there be such a thing as accident in this God-ruled world !), by the merest accident we came upon the tiny hut of a woodcutter, frightening the proprietor almost to death by suddenly breaking in upon his rest, and here we passed the remainder of the night in comparative comfort and at least under shelter.

In the morning, feeling unfit to undertake a journey in my present stiff and feeble condition, I determined to stay where I was and hope for the best—the best being that our enemies would not find us here, for I was not up to much fighting, or, indeed, exertion of any kind.

Then we posted our woodman, who proved to be an excellent and intelligent ally. (Michael was his

name. May the Lord bestow upon him a heavenly Kingdom !) We posted this Michael high up in the branches of a tall pine-tree, with instructions to loudly sing a verse of the song known as the ‘Kamarinsky Moujik’ in case he should see a search-party approach. His position up in the tree would cause no suspicion, since he could justify it by pretending to be busy hewing off the branches preparatory to felling the tree itself.

Michael suggested that in case of danger we should conceal ourselves in his *lyédnik*, or ice-cellar—a convenience which even the peasant in his hut contrives to provide himself withal in this land of much ice and hot summers. In order to be ready for emergency we inspected this ice-cellar, which good Michael used as a store place for his milk and provisions. It consisted of a pit dug in the earth and filled with blocks of ice. A foot or two above the surface of the ice, and level with that of the outer earth was a wooden floor having a trap-door by which to gain access to the ice beneath ; and covering the pit and its deck or floor of wood was a conical roof.

If our enemies should come upon our hiding-place, I not being in fighting condition, we would, we agreed, take refuge upon the ice beneath the flooring—a nice cool place in this hot weather, as Vera remarked, though somewhat cramped in area.

It was well that we had devised this retreat, and still better that trusty Michael was all alert and awake

in his lofty perch among the branches; for about mid-day, as we were discussing a plain but welcome repast of black bread, with milk from the woodman's lean cow, Michael suddenly burst into song, and the familiar strains of the 'Kamarinsky Moujik' warned us that there was good and particular reason for his vocal exertions.

Quickly Vera and I crept to the *lyédnik*, which lay some thirty yards from the hut, and she assisted me to squeeze my stiff body through the trap-door, she following immediately; then—leaving the trap-door open—we lay on the ice-slabs and listened.

First we heard a conversation between Michael and the stranger or strangers—there were two of them we found—and Michael proved to us that he was no exception to the rule of his tribe, the Moujiks of Russia, who are, I admit it (though myself their countryman), the glibbest and the most facile liars that the sun shines upon. He had not seen, he said, any boyar, male or female, wounded or unwounded; boyars never came his way, and he should probably run away if ever one were to appear.

Nevertheless the two men approached the hut, in order to receive personal confirmation of Michael's statement, and we gathered from their conversation as they drew near that the nerves of both were somewhat shaken by the events of the previous night.

'Ha!' one said, 'a hut and an ice-cellар; take the cellar, Piotr, while I inspect the hut.'

‘What if he suddenly pounces out upon us?’ said the other.

‘Tut, man, don’t be a coward; he won’t be here. If I thought he was, I wouldn’t do what I am going to do—stick my head in at the door.’

‘What would you do, then?’ asked the other.

‘On my soul, I don’t know!’ said the first, ‘go home, I think, and say nothing about it; my heart is like wax after last night! ’

‘Shall we inspect together, for safety?’

‘No, no, nonsense—they are not here, or that peasant would be standing lying at the door, or asking us secretly for blood-money. Go and put your nose into the cellar; it is a mere form.’

So Piotr came to our sanctuary and looked in. Then he bravely lay down and put his face over the aperture, trying to peer into the darkness below. This was our opportunity.

‘Take his hair and pull, Vera,’ I said aloud, at the same time employing my more capable arm and hand to grip the fellow by the coat and pull him towards us. Vera obeyed instantly, and together we drew the fellow down to our icy refuge. He gave a fearful shriek of terror, and I heard his companion take to his heels and run; and then, almost immediately, there followed the noise of a scuffle and of a fall. Meanwhile Vera, with my help—the fellow making no resistance—tied our prisoner’s hands and feet with the waist-sash of my kaftan, and in a minute or two we had him safe and sound.

Then, leaving him to cool himself upon the ice, we came up into the air ; and here the first thing we saw was friend Michael standing over the prostrate form of the second of our opponents.

‘ Is he dead, Michael ? ’ I asked.

‘ He is dead, mercifulness,’ said the man, proudly ; ‘ with my axe I slew him. He should have gone free, but that he slashed at me with his sword and called me liar ; for this he died.’

It was just as well for us, however, that the world was poorer by this rogue ; for if he had escaped, his tongue would have wagged, and perhaps we should have suffered for it. Now we were safe for the present, and might rest here in peace and security till to-morrow. By that time, possibly, I might feel capable of continuing the retreat.

And in truth, when the morrow came, I did feel greatly refreshed and invigorated, and determined to lose no more time, but make an effort to push onwards towards home.

Our faithful Michael was therefore sent back to the house of the old boyar, at which we had lodged and fought, and where we had left our horses, with instructions to make careful investigations as to the strength of the party still remaining effective against us. If all had disappeared, he was to demand of the boyar our horses, and, if he pleased, use force or strategy to obtain them.

A few hours later, Michael returned with the

horses, having found none but the boyar himself and a few wounded persons at home ; the rest were, he was informed, absent in the forest, looking for certain misdemeanants for whose capture a reward was offered. Had he seen them ?

‘ Oh, no,’ the woodman had replied, ‘ certainly not ; not a trace of the miscreants.’

‘ Well,’ the old boyar had said, if he should come across them, he might bang the male offender on the head with his axe, and bring the female back to the mansion, when he would receive a handsome sum for his pains, as well as the gratitude of the Tsar and of the boyar himself, whose house they had filled with blood.

Then that wily woodman announced that he had prepared a supply of cut faggots which the boyar might have at a cheap price if he liked. The old miser mentioned a price for the wood, to which Michael demurred, but eventually a bargain was effected, and then Michael played his trump-card.

‘ Your mercifulness,’ he said, ‘ will lend me two horses and a cart to bring in the stuff ? The stables are too full already, I see ; and some of the horses of your mercifulness are tethered in the open yard.’ These were ours and those of the Krilof party.

‘ But you are unknown to me,’ said the boyar, ‘ and how can I tell that you will not make off with my horses, which are worth more than your wood ? ’

‘Your mercifulness !’ said Michael, reproachfully, ‘do I look like a brigand ?’

‘You look like a fool,’ said the boyar, ‘but that means nothing !’

‘Better that than a brigand !’ said Michael; ‘which horses may I use, then, mercifulness ? and where is the cart ?’ Then the boyar evolved a good idea.

‘See here,’ he said, take the horses of the delinquents—they are there in the yard—that brown one, and the yellow beside it—nice horses, too. See that you bring them back in good order ; you may take any cart you please.’

The old boyar chuckled over his own ingenuity in thus saving himself the risk of lending his own animals; and our woodman, with the fool’s face and the fox’s brain (a most common combination among our Russian serf people), left the yard with our horses and with an excellent cart for our use. I made a mental note of the boyar’s kind dispositions with regard to myself, for future reference, and praised Michael for his service.

‘If we escape, Michael,’ I said, ‘you shall have our horses and the boyar’s cart also for your own, and a rouble in money besides !’ a promise which sent good Michael on his knees before his *ikon*, in most devout thanksgiving; after which we started once more upon our journey, heading for Glazovo, a place on the river Chepsa, which is a branch of the Viatka, and using the boyar’s cart, which we nearly

filled with moss, in order that the jolting might spare as far as possible my wounded limbs. Michael acted as driver, and we took with us the prisoner whom we had deposited upon the ice in the woodman's cellar. Michael was all for striking off the fellow's head, but I would not agree to unnecessary bloodshed—an indulgence on my part which gained for me the profession of the prisoner's gratitude, and his promise to tell no tales if, in returning, he happened to encounter those of his late associates who were still engaged in looking for us.

This man proved the sincerity of his professions, afterwards, in a remarkable manner. We set him at liberty ten miles farther on, when, with tears in his eyes he renewed his vows and promises. But as fortune would have it, he must have shortly after happened upon the search-party still abroad after us; for, before we had travelled many miles farther, we observed two or three horsemen following us, and behold! our grateful friend was with them, evidently acting as their guide, and seated in front of one of the party on horseback.

Apparently these good people had formed their own opinion—and that a flattering one—as to my prowess in fight, for though they must have known that I was wounded and stiff, and not in my best fighting condition, yet they did not venture to approach but followed at a respectful distance, evidently determined to make no attack in daylight and in the open, but to

watch their opportunity and to dog us until it should arise.

When we stopped and encamped for the night, they did the same ; so that it became necessary to set a watch and take our sleeping in turns, Vera insisting upon taking her watch with the rest. I felt by this time as though I could fight a little, at a pinch ; and if only these good fellows would kindly follow us, as I told my princess, for a few days longer, I should be in a position to turn the pursuit in the opposite direction ; unless, indeed, they would oblige me with a set-to, of which I cherished little hope.

I suppose our pursuers made sure that if they only kept us in view they were sure of their prey eventually, and desired to run no risk ; hence we were not attacked during the night, nor yet during the whole of the following day, which we spent in jogging along as best we might over country roads and tracks towards the Chepsa, they following as before. How long this foolish pursuit might have lasted before I should have felt myself strong enough to end it, I cannot tell ; for the end came unexpectedly, and in a manner which was as agreeable to myself as it must have been disagreeable to our pursuers.

We were nearing the Chepsa, and were but a few miles from the little town of Glazovo, when from out the heart of a dense birch-patch there suddenly sprang two or three wild-looking forms, who seized our reins and stopped the horses and were about to lay hands

upon Michael and myself, when I caught sight of a face I knew among them, one of Yermak's men, and called to the fellow by name. At the sound of my voice, Yermak himself came out of the bushes.

'What, the young Boyar Stroganof, my sworn friend!' said he. 'Away, men, let go of the reins, Yashka! Now, what do you here, my son? What is the matter?—you are bound and plastered all over, and the sweet maiden of the Krilofs still with you, I perceive—then the Tsar has made a bad choice!'

I hastily told Yermak the latter part of our adventures, and how the Tsar had first despatched me and then sent to overtake me, and of my great fight on the stairs and of this foolish pursuit now in progress.

'What,' said Yermak, 'yonder horsemen that rode behind you? I took them for a portion of your own party. After them, men!'

And in this place it may be mentioned that half an hour or so later, Yermak's men returned with three horses, but no prisoners, from which fact I deduced the worst fears for the fate of my late enemies; but for the sake of sparing Vera's feelings I asked no questions.

When we were safely quartered upon Yermak's galley—and familiar quarters were these to both Vera and myself—I gave Yermak a fuller description of all that had happened in consequence of the Tsar's choice of a bride, and of our escape and marriage, at all of which the chief looked grave.

' You cannot go to Perm,' he said ; ' for the angry Tsar would hunt you down if he heard of your arrival there. You cannot go to Molebsk, for the Krilofs outdo the Tsar in their enmity towards you ; he is at times friendly, as I understand it—but they never. Where did you intend to go to ? '

' To Perm,' I said, ' which is my home.'

' It is impossible,' said Yermak ; ' you must disappear, it is your only safety ; I know of only one man in Russia who can both protect and conceal you.'

' I can protect myself,' said I, interrupting him hotly ; ' let the Tsar send another party to take or slay me. Where is the last one ? '

' Cut to pieces, I know,' said Yermak ; ' you can protect yourself against the swords of the enemy as well as most, granted : but what of treachery ? '

' It is true, Sasha,' said Vera ; ' Perm would be dangerous to us, and Molebsk impossible.' I flushed angrily, for all this was true but humiliating.

' And who is the only personage able to protect those who are unable to protect themselves ? ' I asked, somewhat haughtily.

' Yermak ! ' said that individual.

CHAPTER XXIII

SIBERIAN PROJECTS

THIS moment was, though I was not aware of it at the time, an exceedingly important crisis in my life.

'What thou, Yermak?' I cried, laughing scornfully; 'a Yermak protect a Stroganof? It is the wolf patronising the tiger.'

Yermak flushed a little. 'If it were not thou, but another, Stroganof,' he said, 'that spoke thus to Yermak—but this is foolishness, for thou it is and none other, the saviour of my child; we will not quarrel for foolish words. Now listen: for a while, at least, thou must stay with me, my son, for there is no other place for thee; the Tsar is the Tsar.'

'Yes,' I said, 'the Tsar is the Tsar, and a man is a man; as for me, I fear neither Tsar nor devil.'

'That may be,' said Yermak; 'and none here doubts it; but the Tsar's sword is longer than thine, Stroganof.'

'Yermak is right, my soul,' said Vera; 'we will bide where we are for awhile, and thou shalt recover thy full strength before we brave the Tsar and his servants again!'

And bide we did with Yermak and his men, and right merry and happy we were; sailing or lazily floating day long and week long by river and lake; and hunting to our hearts' content on shore, when the desire possessed us to leave the galley for the dark green of the forest, or the pink heather and purple bilberry of the moors. It was a gay and delightful life, for was not my princess ever at my side, and the blue sky above my head, and the free air of the open country in my lungs? The circumstances were each and all the most favourable possible to my natural disposition—no wonder that I enjoyed life, in spite of the wrath of Tsars and the furiousness of Krilofs and other enemies!

As for Yermak, I became greatly attached to this wonderful man, and remained with him at his urgent entreaty until the following spring; wintering among his people on the shores of the Volga not far from its inflow into the Caspian Sea. We had many conversations as to my future plans, and made many projects of pioneering and adventure in various parts of the world. But Yermak's favourite project of all was a proposed expedition into the unknown country beyond the Urals. There was wealth beyond there, said Yermak, in minerals and rich soil, for any who chose to take it, sufficient to enrich a thousand Tsars, and land enough to provide an empire for each. Why should not we—he and I—cross the mountains and set the Russian flag waving on the banks of

the great Siberian river ? That would surely placate the wrath of my offended sovereign, for we should bring and lay at his feet a new crown.

'Yermak,' I cried, when first he broached in my hearing these imperial dreams of his ; 'have you been studying the Stroganof prophecy ! '

'Nay,' said he, 'I knew not that there existed such a prophecy ! '

Whereupon I quoted to Yermak the words which have been quoted before, about the Stroganofs presenting 'the East' to the Tsar, and his joy thereat.

Yermak was deeply impressed with what I told him. He pondered for many moments, and afterwards took me aside to speak seriously to me.

'Sasha,' he said, 'it may be that there is a great destiny before us ; if there really exist this prophecy, then——'

'As to that,' I interrupted, laughing, 'go to Perm, and ask anyone you please ; everyone knows it there ! '

'Then,' continued Yermak, very serious and almost solemn, 'then, Sasha, I firmly believe that it is thou and I, and none others, who are destined to fulfil this prediction. It is a splendid destiny ! '

'Certainly it is,' said I, still laughing, though somewhat impressed by Yermak's words and evident conviction ; 'but one cannot conquer a continent with a couple of galleys full of brigands ! '

'When there is work to do, God gives hands to do

it !' said Yermak. Was Yermak also among the prophets ? It would appear so.

When spring came and the rivers had rid themselves of their icy encumbrance, we shaped our course by streams and lakes for Perm ; and right glad was I to behold my beloved Kama once more. No less delighted was Vera herself. We stood hand in hand upon the deck of our galley, as we sped slowly on towards our old home. We passed the spot where Yermak had first caught us, and where I had nearly but not quite succeeded in effecting her escape and mine one dark night, as has already been described ; and we passed also the spot where, but three years or four years since, my wilful princess had ridden down to the shore and plunged her horse into the swollen Kama, rather than submit to be tamely captured by her boy-lover ; and we laughed together over her escapade, and I told my princess that her laughter was foolish, because assuredly if she found herself in a like position, to this very day, she would do the same thing.

And Vera laughed the more, and said that she believed she would also.

Our object in coming to Perm was to see my uncle, in order to obtain his sanction, authority and assistance in our projected enterprise beyond the Urals. We had ourselves conveyed in our galley up to the very town of Perm, to the great alarm and consternation of the peaceful inhabitants, who

cherished a wholesome fear and regard for the renowned Yermak, whose name was a terror throughout this portion of the realm, where—though never cruel to his fellow-creatures, stern and unbending as he was to all who resisted or offended him—he was well known to entertain views as to personal property which did not tally with those of the weaker proprietors. But when it was seen that I was with Yermak, and that my beautiful princess was also with us, the alarm gave way to curiosity; and I observed that the people had much to say to one another about us, as we passed, and that they whispered and wagged their heads knowingly, and occasionally crossed themselves, from all of which I inferred that a portion, at all events, of our story was known, and that these good folks, seeing me with the brigand Yermak, concluded that I was in appropriate company.

But my poor uncle and my brothers nearly expired with terror when they beheld me.

'For the love of God, Sasha,' said my uncle, with tears in his eyes, 'go back whence you came, and hide yourself where you have been up to this time concealed, and for the love of God also tell me not where that place is. Do you not know that you are outlawed and accursed, and that there is a price upon your head?' I laughed, and said that I was not aware of this interesting fact.

'What have I done,' I asked, 'that I am outlawed?'

' You have offended the Tsar,' said my uncle, ' though in what particular manner only rumour has described; but the Tsar is offended, and would rather have you dead than living, and the Tsar's sword is long and sharp. Therefore, for pity's sake, Sasha—son of my dead brother though you be, and the best, as I believe, of all the Stroganofs—go hence, for your own sake and also for ours, for the Tsar's wrath will assuredly consume us also if we harbour and protect you ! '

' Be comforted, uncle,' I said, ' I shall not stay; but bless me first, and this princess, my wife, and then I will tell thee what I have in my mind.'

So my uncle blessed and embraced Vera and me, and in his own courtly way he told her that, though he was a Stroganof, and she a Krilof, her loveliness outweighed the enmity of generations, and he welcomed so beautiful a creature into the family as an acquisition. ' For God's sake, Sasha,' he ended, ' keep her safely from the eyes of the Tsar, and risk nothing for thyself, so that thou remain alive to protect her ! '

' As to that, uncle,' said I, ' fear nothing for me, and if I am not by to protect her, Vera can protect herself as well as most ! '

From all of which I gathered that my uncle had heard rumours more or less founded upon fact as to the relations between the Tsar and my princess. But when I informed him that the Tsar had actually bidden me marry Vera, warning me at the same time

to ride away as fast as our horses could carry us, he was surprised indeed, which was only natural, seeing that he did not know the complex circumstances of the case and the bewildering, double nature of the Tsar.

Afterwards I told my uncle of Yermak's project for enterprise beyond the Urals, and of his conviction—which Yermak presently confirmed—that the Stroganof prophecy was destined to find fulfilment at my hands and his. My uncle reflected long and deeply, being also greatly impressed with this idea, and presently gave as his opinion that it might very well be as we had concluded—or as Yermak had, for I as yet failed to realise myself as the long-foretold conqueror—but that if so, this could not happen at the present time, for such a great enterprise as the conquest of a continent would need much preparation and the collecting of a large force of soldiers. We might indeed now make a preliminary survey of the country in preparation for a future campaign, and indeed we could scarcely do anything wiser than betake ourselves beyond the Urals, pending the Tsar's return to a more friendly attitude towards myself.

'As for present assistance,' my good uncle said, we were rich, we Stroganofs, and, God knew, I was welcome to my share, though I did not contribute much to the wealth of the family! At this I laughed, and said that if I added Siberia to the Stroganof possessions, I should have done my share, whereupon

Yermak looked preternaturally grave, and my uncle turned to the *ikon* and piously crossed himself.

'What God will give that He shall give!' he said reverently.

The result of all of which was that Yermak and I, with our wives and one of my brothers—who discerned, with his merchant's eye, great commercial possibilities in the enterprise, and came as a trader and nominal chief of the expedition, we others forming his escort—spent the whole of that summer exploring the territory beyond the great range of the Urals—trading, fighting occasionally, and making friends with the natives, and prospecting their country and rivers; and the more we saw of this land the better we liked it, and the more determined did Yermak and I become that one day we would make it our own, or gain it for the Tsar. This expedition had besides another excellent result; it made a man of my brother, who had up to this time been a mere trading animal, of a worthy and harmless, but effeminate type. He now developed quite a love for hunting and the life of the open air; and many times during fighting with the natives of the country, he displayed spirit and energy which no one, knowing him only at Perm and in the bazaars, would have supposed him to possess.

Thirdly, my beautiful princess had before the end of this summer presented me with a magnificent little son, of whom I may have more to say later on. Our married life had been one delightful dream of

happiness, and it has ever been a cherished memory for me that my princess accompanied me upon that first expedition into Siberia, and saw with her own eyes the great empire which her lord and lover was destined, in future days, to conquer.

When we returned to Perm, just before the setting in of winter, I found to my delight that, by the clemency of the Tsar, my master, the putting of a price upon my head had been withdrawn, so that I was now able to live in peace at the home of my fathers without fear of being murdered by some unscrupulous person anxious to touch the reward of so base an action. In my self-sufficiency I had never felt fear on my own account; but the relief which the new state of affairs afforded to my Vera's anxiety was so great that I could not forbear, in sympathy with her, to rejoice also.

I learned later that I had Adashef to thank for the Tsar's clemency; for that Ivan Vasilitch was now entirely under the control and benignant influence of the monk Sylvester and of Adashef; and that the Tsaritsa had quite won by this time the heart of her imperious young lord, who was now dominated by the trio mentioned, and was in process of being converted into a reformed character.

All this was pleasant hearing for me, and gave me hopes that the day might even yet dawn, and that soon, when my master and I should renew our old intimate and friendly relations. For though I had

learned, at Vera's hands, that there are better things in this world than the favour of the Tsar, yet I sorely longed, at times, to be at peace with my master, for whom, in spite of everything, I cherished a peculiarly warm love, and an equally intense pity.

CHAPTER XXIV

AN INTERVIEW WITH THE TSAR

If I were to set down all my adventures from the point at which my record has now arrived up to the present time with as much detail as has been used in the description of my quarrel with my master and its causes and results, I should produce indeed a mass of manuscript, for my life has been from its beginning, or near it, to its end—counting this present time as the end, for the real end cannot now be far distant (and indeed the end of activity and the life of energy is, for me, the end of all things in so far as this life is worth the living)—one long term of adventure and incident. My late master, the Tsar Ivan, was a great letter-writer. His correspondence was ever the most voluminous, and I believe I must have learned from him, during our close intimacy of the last few years of his life, to love the exercise of setting quill to paper; for up to that time I never did much writing of any kind, though always a ‘grammatnui,’ as we call those who are able to read and write, being generally too busy with a more warlike implement than the pen to have

time for the occupation which now, in the stiffness and feebleness of advancing years, I have learned to love; it is a good pastime for those who can do nothing better; I suppose for the reason that the next best thing to fighting or hunting, or living adventurously, is to speak or write of these matters.

Yermak took his leave of us after our return to Perm, having first solemnly promised to visit me at springtime once in every two years until such time as, in the wisdom of my uncle, it would be possible for us to undertake the campaign upon which, by this time, both we and he and even my brothers had set our hearts. But my uncle bade us practise patience, for, said he, there was no opportunity at present for such enterprise. If undertaken now, it would partake of the character of a mere piratical expedition, and would undoubtedly displease the Tsar, whose mind was not at present prepared for conquests in his name in the direction of Siberia.

'Let us first prove to the Tsar the necessity of the undertaking, and our ability to carry it out,' said my uncle, 'and then let us set about it with his sanction; this may not be in my day, but the day will come that we Stroganofs shall set our foot upon the neck of the Siberian Tsar. I am sure of it; I see it in my dreams, nightly.'

Therefore the prospective Siberian campaign settled itself in our brains and there remained a fixed and permanent guest for some twenty years.

Meanwhile, to deal first with my uncle's activity during that period, in order to make way for my own records ; the Stroganofs during the next few years displayed the most astonishing energy. Their trade in dried fish and, especially, in salt of their own production and preparation, increased so enormously that several towns sprang up between Perm and the Urals as the direct product of their extended operations. These towns were peopled almost exclusively by persons employed by the Stroganofs to work the various new salt-digging and preparing establishments inaugurated by my energetic uncle and brothers. Each of these Stroganof towns was surrounded by a considerable wall to protect it from incursions by the wild and warlike tribes inhabiting the slopes of the Urals, and was moreover provided with a kind of garrison of fighting men, mostly Cossacks from the Don and 'birds of the Steppes,' as the wilder Cossack robbers from the district indicated were then called. In this manner, my wise and really great uncle prepared the way, very gradually, for the darling project of his heart, and by the time a score or so of years (from Ivan's accession) had passed, he had actually so far extended his influence and his commercial interests, that he had obtained permission from the Tsar to establish small forts and business centres on the eastern side of the Urals, as far as the river Tobol, a tributary of the Obi.

The Tsar, to his great honour be it said, did not

allow his displeasure with myself (which, alas ! burned like the lamp before an *ikon*, unextinguishable in his bosom !) to stand between the other members of my family and his favour. With that greatness of mind and breadth of vision which ever distinguished my imperial master, Ivan did not fail to observe the value of the work being done by the Stroganofs of Perm, and since my uncle never undertook the founding of a new city or any advance eastwards without first asking the sanction of the Tsar, and offering a fair tribute to the crown upon any profits he might make by the new enterprise, Ivan invariably gave his consent to such undertakings, generally couched in one of those long-winded but very complete and comprehensive letters in which his soul took delight.

So, then, my uncle and my brothers prepared the way for Yermak and for me. Meanwhile, I—restless spirit that I was—and partly because I was anxious to regain the favour of my offended master, threw myself with fervour into any and every enterprise which seemed to savour of adventure, and to contain the opportunity for distinction.

I was at Kazan when that Mussulman city was taken by the armies of Ivan ; the first great victory in Russia of Cross over Crescent. I may say, without boasting, that I was the very first Russian to enter the place after the walls had been breached by the exertions of our German engineers ; it is in reality no boast to

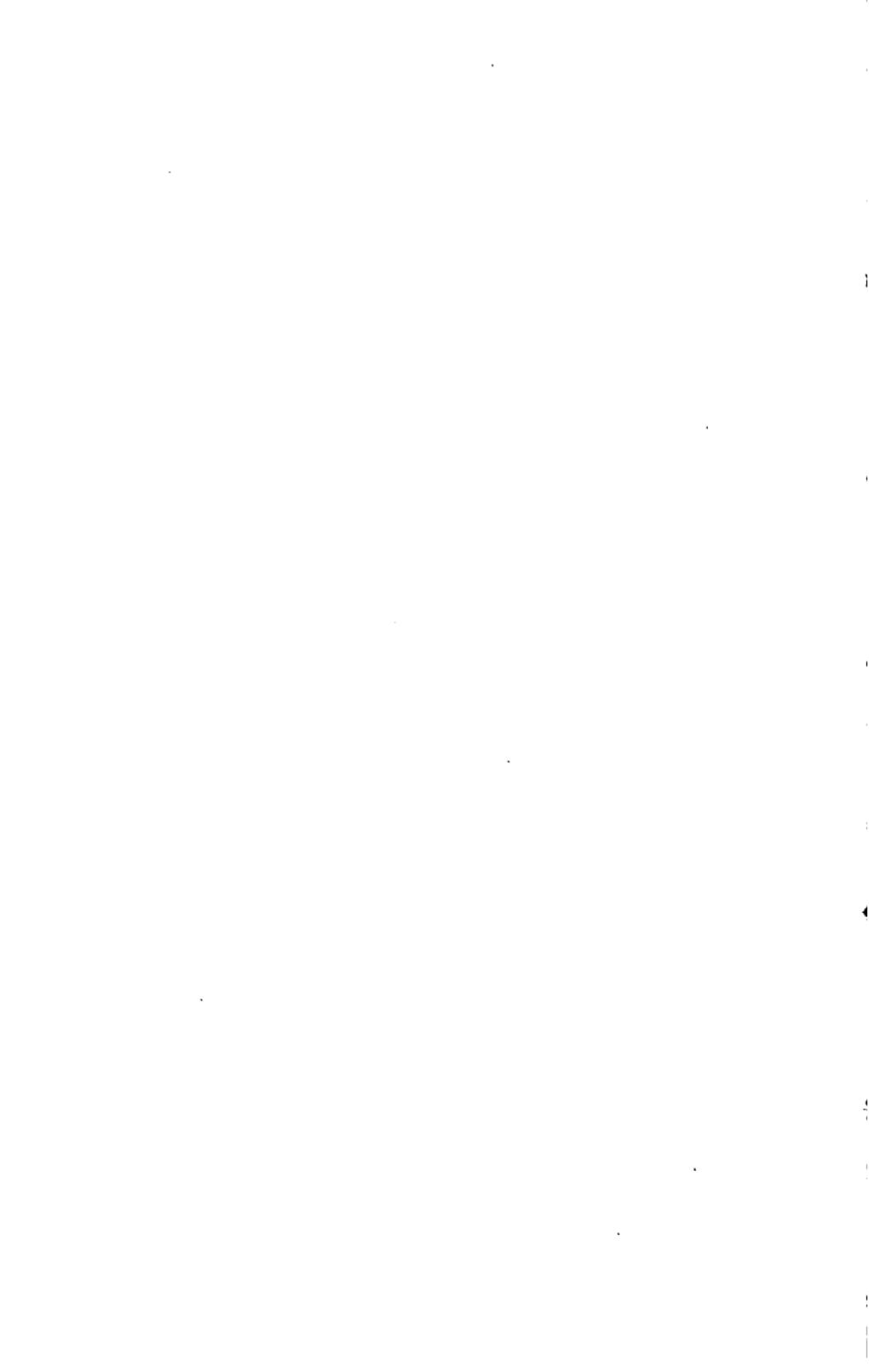
claim this distinction, because I achieved it by no merit of my own. I was one of those who swarmed over the breach, a dense mass of fighters, and was knocked on the head from behind by one of our own men, and sent tumbling into the streets of Kazan. Why my friend should have treated me so unceremoniously I am unable to say; probably he was desirous to be himself the first over the walls, and feared that my manifest energy would forestall him. At any rate, down I went unconscious, and my friends swarmed over me.

And unconscious I remained for some little while, to which fact I may attribute my escape from a very shocking spectacle—namely, the massacre of the Tartar population of Kazan by the Christians. So terribly complete was the slaughter, that the city of Kazan has never to this day recovered its Mussulman population to any considerable extent; and those few Tartars who still inhabit the place are to be found only in the suburbs.

The Tsar was present in person at the taking of Kazan; I had often seen him during the preliminary operations, but had avoided his observation, fearing lest the sight of me should anger him, and that I should be instructed to depart before the storming of the city. Adashef saw me once, but at my urgent entreaty he agreed to say nothing to the Tsar, who, he told me, never mentioned my name, and must, he feared, still be incensed against me.



I was knocked on the head by one of my own men and sent
tumbling into the street of the town



'And yet I am innocent of conscious offence, Adashef !' I said.

Adashef laughed. 'The Tsar is a most devoted husband to his wife, Sasha,' he said; 'I do not think he any longer covets another man's goods.'

'Yet he continues angered against those who are in possession of them !' I said bitterly.

'Who can read the Tsar's mind ?' said Adashef; 'not I, for one !'

Nevertheless I both saw and spoke to the Tsar at this time, and it happened in this wise.

I have said that I was knocked senseless into Kazan by someone from behind; and it so happened, luckily for me, that the enemy were not at hand to finish the work done by my own side; for at our appearance at the breach they had fled very quickly away. In consequence, I was the only wounded man in this place, and I lay unconscious or but half-conscious, until I suddenly heard a very familiar voice in conversation with Kurbsky, the commander of our forces. It was the Tsar's voice, and my faculties seemed to return at the sound of it, though I could not exercise sufficient volition to open my eyes or to raise myself to my feet.

The troops were busy plundering and murdering, and the sound of their hellish proceedings reached my ears from a distance. The Tsar's voice sounded miles away also, though he and Kurbsky stood close to me upon the loose stones of the breach, for the

Tsar was now entering the city for the first time, under Kurbsky's guidance. His voice, in the joy and triumph of the moment, sounded jubilant.

'Here is a dead soldier, Kurbsky,' he said, 'and from his appearance, a boyar; what does he here?'

'It is the body of him who was the first to enter the city,' said Kurbsky, 'as I am informed, and his name is one that should be familiar to thee, Ivan Vasilitch; he is Alexander Stroganof.'

'What!' said the Tsar, as though moved or amazed, 'Sasha Stroganof, and dead?' I tried to open my eyes or to move, in order to show that I lived, but for the life of me I could not.

'It is certainly Stroganof,' said Kurbsky, 'and undoubtedly, I fear, dead; for see, he moves not, and does not seem to breathe.'

'God have mercy upon his soul, and Christ receive it,' said Ivan; 'and his wife a widow!' he added.

At this I made a second effort to sit up in order to show that my poor princess was not to mourn me yet awhile, but the result of the effort was a little sigh and nothing more.

'See, he moves!' said Kurbsky, 'he is not dead; our voices have roused him. Awake, Stroganof, it is the Tsar!'

'Nay, if he be alive,' said the Tsar, coldly, 'let him be, he will recover without our aid. Send him to me, Kurbsky, when he is fit for it; I would speak with him.'

Consequently, that night, as I lay weak and weary and sick, with the grievous head-blow I had received, Kurbksky came and bade me attend in the Tsar's pavilion on the following morning, and to the great tent of his Highness I dragged myself at the time appointed. I went with light heart, though with stiff and painful limbs, for I made sure that the Tsar would now forgive me, or rather—since I had done nothing wrong—receive me back into that favour of which I had been so long unjustly deprived.

But the Tsar had no favour for me.

'I have sent for thee, boyar, to bid thee return whence thou camest,' he said; 'see that thou depart before the sun sets a second time.'

'Tsar Ivan Vasilitch!' I said, bursting, I believe, into tears, in my weakness and my disappointment; 'hast thou no measure of favour for me?'

'None,' said he, 'there is no friendship between thee and me, Stroganof, nor can ever be; what thou hast done thou hast done knowing this, that in doing it there must be an end of all things between us.'

'Is there never to be an end to thy wrath, Tsar?' I said.

'My wrath against thee is ended long since. There remains only the word of the Tsar; what I have said I have said and cannot alter. Didst thou not marry a wife?'

'The Princess Vera is my wife,' I said, 'as she was my betrothed wife before thy *ookaz*, Tsar.'

‘Some there are who grudge neither treasure nor even life itself when the Tsar asks it of them. I asked a little thing of thee, Stroganof, and thou wouldest not !’

‘Is love a little thing,’ I said hotly, ‘which is more strong than life ? Ask my treasure, my service, my very life of me, and I will give it to thee, Tsar, and that thou knowest.’

‘It is better to give what is asked of thee than to offer that which is not needed,’ said Ivan ; ‘I asked of thee, not thy life’s love, but simple obedience to the word of the Tsar.’

‘The two years are past and gone now,’ I said, ‘and the Tsaritsa, whom God preserve, still lives and is in good health ; I should have married Vera Krilof before now even though I had waited at thy bidding.’

‘It is true, and my own wife is a very angel from heaven,’ said Ivan, intensely ; ‘but thou hast nevertheless put to scorn the word of the Tsar.’

‘Pardon, then, Ivan Vasilitch,’ I said.

‘No pardon, I say,’ he cried ; ‘must the Tsar eat his words to please thee ?’

I bowed and made as though to retire, for it was useless to prolong this conversation. But the Tsar called to me to stop, and said, speaking rapidly and flushing :

‘Tell thy wife that the Tsaritsa grows more beautiful each day ; that she is a very angel from heaven,

and that the Tsar loves her, as he loved her from the first, with all his soul. Tell her this.'

I did tell my princess what the Tsar said of the Tsaritsa, and Vera laughed and said : 'Tell the Tsar, when you see him, that my own man is as much a man as ever—not angelic altogether, but a good enough husband for a tiger-cat ; and that I love him, as I loved him from the first, with all my soul !' And then we both laughed ; and though I do not quite know what we laughed at, I believe Vera did.

CHAPTER XXV

AMONG THE ENGLISH

THE next year and a half were spent by me in the quiet happiness of domestic life at Perm. I do not mean that I sat at home and courted my beautiful wife, and played with the two little Stroganofs who had appeared since our union to fill our hearts with thankfulness and to modify the Amazonian spirit of my princess, who now settled down to maternal interests and duties with as beautiful a grace as she had ever displayed in the wild days of her girlhood. I did but little sitting at home ; that is not my department in life, as Nature fashioned me ; but I lived at Perm and hunted in the woods around, and loved my wife none the less because I was not for ever at her elbow. If I understand my princess—as I think I do—I am convinced that she would not have had it otherwise, for she well knew that a man must live his life as God intended him to live it, following the bent of his particular disposition. My princess would have wept to see me lose my passion for the life of the woods and my love for danger and adventure. Had

I grown uxorious and a lover of indoor pleasures, I think Vera would have chased me forth into the forest, bidding me take my dogs and my knife and hunt, lest I developed into a sloth and a sluggard, and lost that manhood in me which had won for me her own heart.

So, then, I passed my time in hunting, leaving to my princess the responsibility of training the earliest glimmerings of understanding in our little ones, a task which who can perform more properly or more beautifully than a mother? Occasionally Vera would find time to ride out with me, and her ecstasy on such festival days proved beyond doubt that my wife's youthful spirit was still alive and did but lie in abeyance in favour of the more engrossing duties of maternity.

But my own restless spirit tired, presently, of life at Perm, and I was glad when the time approached at which Yermak had appointed to meet me upon the Kama; for I longed to go afield and find adventure. I longed most of all for reconciliation with the Tsar, in order that I might take my proper place in his armies, which were to fight again and again during these years with the hosts of Islam, and to wrench the standard of the Crescent from the position it had usurped upon the fortresses and cities which belonged of right to the people of Holy Russia. But the Tsar, I knew, would have none of me at present.

Yermak came at the time appointed, and had proposals to make, which pleased me. The Cossack

chief suggested an expedition up the Dwina river as far as the great Northern sea ; an enterprise which might possibly prove extremely profitable to him, and was sure to provide me with a sufficiency of that adventure for which my soul thirsted.

Accordingly I agreed to go with Yermak, taking my princess and her pair of babes with me, and journeying by river and lake, through the pleasant summer months, until we reached the monastery at the mouth of the Dwina known as the House of St. Michael,¹ where we met with a notable adventure.

Our galleys lay at anchor in the fine basin of the river, and beyond us glittered that wonderful sea upon which neither Vera nor I had ever set eyes up to this day, and of which, from my very first glance at it, I determined to know more before I should be greatly older.

We had not been at anchor in this place for many days, when, to our surprise, a large foreign ship came sailing in from sea, and Yermak was all for attacking the vessel with our galleys, a proposal to which I was unwilling to agree. Presently a large gun was fired from the ship, not, as I believe, with the intention of injuring us, but by way of some sort of signal or greeting ; for, so far as I could see, there was no shot or cannon ball : at any rate, none struck the water near us.

Presently, a portion of the crew of the vessel, together with the captain, who seemed a boyar of distinguished appearance, embarked in a small boat

¹ Afterwards Archangel.

and came ashore, Yermak and I, together with an armed following, doing the same. We met on the shore and exchanged peaceful salutations, the foreign boyar being a person of excellent manners and very courtly air.

He told us, through an interpreter (whom he had picked up on the coast of Norway, a Russian fisherman who had been cast ashore in that country, and had now found this means of returning to his native land), that they came from the country of the English King Edward, and had sailed with three vessels under the command of one Willoughby, who—with two of the ships—had gone to the bottom of the sea during a great storm of wind. Then this boyar, the lieutenant of the expedition, by name Chancellor,¹ had pushed on alone, being determined to investigate this great northern sea, the girdle of the world, which led, it was said, to the country of the Kitai Tsar,² and had found himself, at length, where he now was. What land was this? and who was our Sovereign? and were we standing, Chancellor asked, under the North Pole?

We told Chancellor that he had come a long way, and that he now stood in the northern part of the empire of the Tsar of Moscow, Ivan Vasilitch.

'Then,' said Chancellor, 'I will leave my ship and go pay my respects to this Tsar of yours, for I have

¹ Whom the Russian records call 'Chensler.'

² China.

letters to him from our English King, and many matters of great importance to discuss.'

But first the Tsar himself must be consulted as to what should be done with these foreigners, and there was a very long delay while messengers were sent to Moscow. During this time of waiting I made great friends with the English boyar, who learned a little of our language, and I some of his ; and together we hunted, and fished the waters of the great sea, and went and came together as intimate friends. Chancellor was surprised at the loveliness of my princess, and asked me whether all Russian women were as beautiful as she, to which I replied that there was but one sun in the heavens, with many lesser stars ; and on earth but one Vera.

Chancellor had somewhat to teach me in the art of sword-fencing, an art in which I was quick to learn, and not slow to outstrip my master ; but in such matters as swimming, hunting, running,—as well as in strength of limb and hand, the Englishman—though active for his age, and no weakling, and as brave as any lion—was far below me.

When the answer came from the Tsar, it was evident that Ivan thought very greatly indeed of the arrival of the English ship, and desired to do the English boyar much honour, for he bade him come directly to Moscow, and ordered far and wide that he be treated on his way with every respect and every consideration, as a great ambassador between princes.

When I found that this was the bent of the Tsar's mind, I determined to accompany Chancellor to Moscow, as his discoverer, if one may make a vain boast and claim as a virtue what was in reality an accident; for I hoped that the Tsar would account it a good service to have brought this foreigner to his Court, and would smile upon me once again, especially as all agreed that no husband could be more devoted to his wife than was he, by this time, to his Romanof Tsaritsa.

This visit of Chancellor to Moscow was the first beginning of the Tsar's relations with England, with which country our wise Tsar—recognising its power and influence in the world, and the marvellous activity of its merchants and navigators—ever displayed the greatest desire to come into close and familiar intercourse.

Chancellor was received at the Tsar's dinner-table, where Ivan sent him the bread and salt, addressing him by his name, Richard Chancellor, and according to him the first portion of each dish; but Chancellor said no word until after the repast, having no right to speak, but only to bow (which he did with supreme grace) until invited to converse with the Tsar. The Tsar sat this day upon his Chair of State, which was so thickly inlaid with gems of a kind called 'turquoise,' ten thousand of which were used for the back of the chair alone, that not an atom of the silver or ivory of

the throne¹ is visible, but only gems placed as close to one another as the stones that pave the roads here and there, in the city of the English king.

The Tsar looked first surprised and then embarrassed and angry when he saw that I was among the companions of the English boyar; nevertheless he did not vent his displeasure upon me publicly, but sent me the bread and salt and my portion of the repast, though he spoke my name with frowning brow. Moreover, though I tarried in Moscow all the while that Chancellor himself remained, Ivan did not send me away; so that I began to hope his anger against me was gradually cooling down, and when at last I was blessed with an interview with my master, I found to my intense joy that this was indeed the case.

And yet, even now, the old fire of his wrath burst forth again, showing that it only smouldered and was far from being quenched; though I must admit, in justice to my master, that it was my own foolishness that awoke the slumbering flames.

I came face to face with the Tsar in the Church of Uspensky, where he leaned on the arm of Sylvester, that good and great man, who, with Adashef and the Tsaritsa, for upwards of ten years kept within bounds such passions as have rarely swelled in human breast before or since; for such were the passions of Ivan of Russia, the terrible Tsar.

He was not terrible on this day of the Uspensky.

¹ This throne may still be seen in the Kremlin.

On the contrary, softened by the exercise of prayer and worship, Ivan actually smiled upon me, as he met me, and sending Sylvester away upon some pretext, took my own arm instead of the monk's.

'Thou hast done me a service in bringing to me this English merchant, Sasha,' he said; 'I will remember it to thy credit.'

'Alas! how many services must be added together to regain me thy favour, Tsar Ivan Vasilitch?' I said.

'Perhaps many, perhaps few; but this shall be reckoned the second, for I have not forgotten thee at Kazan; thou mayest yet regain thy place in the land, Stroganof, and in my heart; let us pray together before the *ikon* of St. Methodius.' Which we did, the Tsar praying longer than I and more devoutly. He was at this time an enthusiast in religion, and ever afterwards—even in his most savage and implacable fits of passion and cruelty—he never forgot the devout habits now acquired, but invariably prayed heartily for those who had suffered as his victims.

Afterwards the Tsar accompanied me through the streets, still leaning upon my arm, and asking me many questions—not one of which was about my beautiful Vera. Had I been aught but a thoughtless fool, I should have let well alone and said nothing also on that dangerous subject; but destiny having determined that I should play the part of a fool, I did so, and mentioned her name. The Tsar flushed

and made a gesture of anger ; I saw both, but made as though I had seen neither.

‘Where, then, is the boyarinya Stroganof ?’ asked Ivan, after a pause.

‘At the Stroganof mansion,’ I said.

‘At Perm ?’

‘In Moscow. I brought her with me.’

The Tsar stopped suddenly in his course and crossed himself, muttering something which I did not hear.

‘Come,’ he said, ‘I will see this woman !’ and taking my arm once more, he hurried me away towards the Stroganof house, walking much faster than we had walked before, but saying nothing. When we reached the mansion I glanced at the Tsar and saw that he was very pale and even trembled a little, and that his lips seemed to be busy in prayer.

Vera had not expected to see the Tsar, and was somewhat disconcerted by his sudden arrival. She caught up the child she had been playing with, thus betraying that her first instinct on seeing the Tsar was fear, or distrust. Iván noticed nothing of this, however ; he fixed his hawk’s eyes upon Vera’s face and gazed intently upon her ; the child cried.

This appeared to touch some chord which angered Ivan. He suddenly stamped and turned his back upon mother and infant, without having said so much as a word of greeting.

‘Take her hence,’ he said to me, looking quite

livid with rage; ‘I have married an angel from heaven; what have I to do with devils? Get thee behind me, Satan!’ My spirit took fire at his words.

‘My wife is no devil, Tsar,’ I said boldly; ‘the devil that vexes thee is within thy own bosom.’ Ivan raised his staff, as though to strike me.

‘Tsar Ivan,’ said my princess, ‘you dare not!’ The Tsar let his staff fall to the ground.

‘No,’ he said, ‘I dare not; I am not as I was in the days of darkness; I am the servant of God. We will kneel together before the *ikon*!'

It was all I could do to retain my gravity under this sudden change. The Tsar was certainly an apt pupil of Sylvester, or the monk was a marvellous master. Nevertheless, we knelt with the Tsar before the *ikon*.

When our prayers were finished, he was calm, and addressing me, having averted his face from Vera, upon whom he did not bestow another look during the rest of the interview, he bade me, without further parley, escort Chancellor back to the Dwina, and accompany him to England.

‘Take with thee thy wife,’ he added, ‘for it is ill for a man to separate himself from her to whom God has united him. Go, then, to this English king’s country, and learn what thou canst of his people and trade, and all that concerns them; this I shall account a service from thee. Chancellor will depart tomorrow, and thou and she with him; now, farewell.’

And with these words the Tsar left the room, without having glanced at or spoken to my princess.

And thus it came about that not only I, but also my beloved wife, accompanied Chancellor from Moscow, and leaving our little ones with Yermak to be carefully brought to Perm, to be tended by our own people there, we took ship with the English boyar upon his great vessel, the 'Edward Bonaventura,' and for the first time in our lives found ourselves, presently, out of sight of land, and plunging up and down upon the bosom of great waves in a manner that was, at the first, extremely unpleasant, causing a sensation of great discomfort and sickness.

The English Tsar Edward was dead when we arrived in his country, but the reigning Tsaritsa Mary was pleased to receive Chancellor with favour, and to extend her grace also to my princess and myself. Both she and the Tsar Philip, her husband, and all their Court were greatly surprised at the loveliness of my wife and at her skill in horsemanship, in which she far excelled all the English ladies who took part with her in the hunting of the deer and foxes, which is a favourite sport of the English people, though I found it very tame after my wolf-chasing and bear-spearng expeditions.

Chancellor returned to Russia after the winter was past, and we of course accompanied him. He bore with him the *ookaz* of the English Tsaritsa, by which was extended to Russian merchants the right to trade

in English ports in return for the privileges granted by my master Ivan at the request of Chancellor to English merchants.

Right glad was my Vera to return in safety to Perm and to her babes, and indeed she had informed me during the journey that if God restored her this time in safety to her children, she would never again leave them, great as was her love for me; for the place of the mother was with her children, and if the father would wander he must wander alone, or the whole family must journey together. The helpless little ones must not, in any case, be left to strangers and serfs to be taken care of.

Hence when Chancellor returned once more to England, together with the first actual Russian ambassador, Osip Nepey, I bade farewell of my tenderly-loved wife and children, and sailed with the Embassy for London, which is the Moscow of the English people. I have thanked God night and morning since that day that it was put into my mind to leave Vera and her babes safely at Perm on this second voyage, for a terrible storm sank two of our ships, drove a third upon the shore of Norway, and Chancellor, his son, Nepey and I, in the 'Edward Bonaventura,' were cast ashore upon the coast of Scotland, where Chancellor and his son were drowned.

It was my good fortune to save the ambassador, Osip Nepey, from drowning with Chancellor. I was swimming to the shore when I caught sight of his

agonised face among the breakers, and was just in time to give him that timely assistance which encouraged him at a desperate moment to continue struggling. Together we safely reached dry land, exhausted, but alive and thankful for our escape, and here we found a few others of the Russian Embassy, with some of the crew, a sadly-reduced company, with whom we journeyed to London, meeting with much unkindness and rough treatment from the savage natives of the northern portion of the English sovereign's dominions.

But in London we had a great reception, being met, when still twelve miles away, by eighty of the principal merchants of that great city, all of whom were mounted on magnificent horses and wore heavy chains of gold. We were allowed to enter the city as though we were great generals returning in triumph from some glorious campaign, rather than poor shipwrecked adventurers, robbed of all we possessed, ragged and weary and travel-stained.

The King and Queen received us, the chief merchant or mayor harangued and entertained us, a guild of merchants, called 'The Drapers,' feasted us so well that not one of us but was sick and sorry on the morrow; and all with whom we came in contact vied in showing us kindness and honour.

On our return to Russia, I received a letter from the Tsar, a good and gracious letter, in which my master said that I had done well in saving his

ambassador from drowning, and that he would remember this service to my credit.

'Thou knowest by this time,' he wrote, 'what things please and what displease me; thou knowest also where the tempter strikes when he would triumph over me. Is it a great thing that thou shouldst be on my side in this day of my repentance? Woe to thee if thou become to me an occasion for stumbling!'

I did not altogether comprehend this mystic communication; but when I asked Vera what she made of it, she laughed and said:

'It means, my soul, that when next you journey to Moscow, you are to leave me at home; and that the Tsar is still a man, even though, as he is so fond of boasting, he has married an angel from heaven!'

CHAPTER XXVI

THE STROGANOF DESTINY IS FULFILLED

THERE came with us from England a certain merchant navigator, called Jenkinson, who was the finest Englishman I have met with. This man carried in his heart an enterprise which, when he revealed to me his intentions, delighted me beyond measure, and in which I then and there determined to take a share.

This was to descend the Volga to Astrakhan, cross the great inland sea called the Caspian, and journey with caravan and goods for barter to the far-away city of Bokhara. This journey we actually accomplished, though we most narrowly escaped massacre, and did, in fact, lose the greater part of our followers, through the treachery of the heathens and savages of that country. But Jenkinson and I and a few others fought our way safely, with our camels and possessions, out of the ambush they had prepared for us, Jenkinson fighting like a lion, and I, if I may make such a boast, doing also, I think, my share, and so we returned in safety to our own side of the Caspian.

After this great enterprise I returned with Jenkinson to England, taking my family with me.

The great Tsaritsa Elizabeth was now the reigning sovereign in that country, and at her Court my wife and I were well treated, and learned to love the English people, and to admire them no less than love them, for their bold, adventurous spirit was that which above all other things attracted both Vera and myself, and among these hardy islanders we found plenty of it. Here I learned the art of the sword and became, as I have hinted, a master fencer. And here my boys learned many valuable lessons of self-control and endurance, boxing and battling with other children of their age and playing in various hardy English games unknown to our boys in Russia.

My Vera was, naturally, a favourite everywhere; but there was one lady of the Court, a relative of the Queen herself, by name Mary Hastings, who resembled my princess so greatly that the two were actually occasionally mistaken for one another.

Now it so happened that I had imparted to the English Tsaritsa as much as I considered warrantable, in discretion, of the events connected with my own Tsar's choice of a bride and of his undoubted fascination by my beautiful wife, whom I said I believed he would have chosen as Tsaritsa but for my petition to him, before the selection, to spare me my only hope of happiness, and perhaps also partly on account of Vera's unconcealed aversion for him.

'Why, then, cousin,' said the Queen to Mary Hastings, laughing, 'here is a chance for thee! Wilt thou be Tsaritsa of Russia? Thou and this Russian princess are like twin-sisters.'

Mary Hastings made a grimace; for, if the truth be told, my Vera had painted the Tsar in colours which did not present an attractive picture of my master.

'But the Tsar is no longer a bachelor, your Majesty,' said I; 'he was married to the Romanof Tsaritsa eleven years ago.'

'Keep thy eyes open, nevertheless, Mary,' said the Queen; 'Tsaritsas of Russia are not immortal, and if this one dies, thou mayest yet sit upon a throne that is higher than mine!'

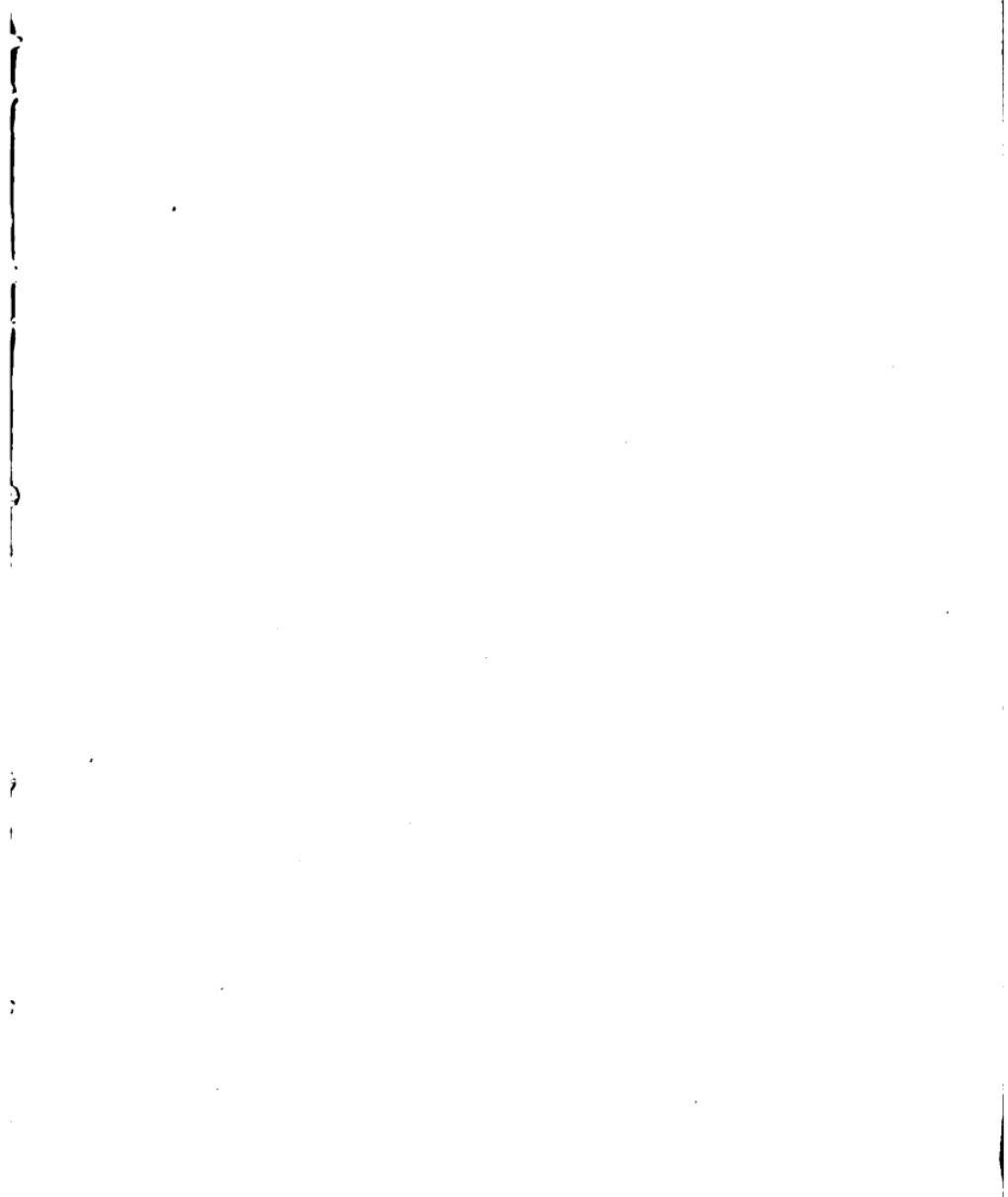
'From all I hear of him,' said Mary Hastings, grimacing once again, 'the husband you propose for me would play a pretty dog to my cat!'

'Or cat to thy mouse!' added the Queen; 'nevertheless, a crown is a crown, even though it sit heavy on the temples.'

I have set down this conversation because it has a bearing upon after events, to which I must presently refer.

We lived in England a year and more at this visit, and when we returned at length to our home in Russia we found sad news awaiting us.

The good Tsaritsa Anastasia Romanovna was dead! The Tsar, mad with grief and rage, had quarrelled with Adashef and Sylvester, his right hand





He suddenly died while playing at chess

and his left, and had chased both these good men from his presence.

Deprived of their influence and of their counsels, and of the soothing, controlling sympathy of his wife, my poor master was lost indeed. He embarked forthwith into quarrels of every kind—with his people and his boyars, as well as with foreign powers. He engaged simultaneously in two warlike enterprises, the one against Islam, represented by the Khan of the Crimea ; the other against the Livonian Order, who were assisted by the Poles. For a short while things went well with the Russian hosts, but presently a run of ill-luck set in, and with it a renewal of the ungovernable, savage phase of my poor master's temper. I cannot set down the atrocities which he committed at this time, during his quarrels with the boyars and people of his realm ; but I may mention that there was a list of nearly 3,500 victims to his passion to be seen in a synodical letter from the Tsar to the Monastery of St. Cyril, in which document the prayers of the Church were asked for the soul of each of these persons.

I make no excuse for the Tsar, excepting such as I have already put forward at the beginning of these records. His passion, when indulged to the full, amounted to insanity ; and I prefer to think of my dead master as, during those years of terror, scarcely answerable for his actions. Feeling himself to be so completely dominated by his passion, at this time, that he could not hope to exercise a patient and

equitable sway over his people, the Tsar abdicated (in 1564); but the boyars—knowing that if the government were left to themselves, the bad would become infinitely worse—prevailed upon him to reconsider his decision, with the result that Ivan entered upon a veritable reign of bloodshed, and visited upon the boyars their offence in compelling an insane man to govern them against his will, by ruthlessly slaughtering both them and their families.

Also, knowing that he had now many enemies within the realm, the Tsar corresponded with the English Queen Elizabeth, entreating at her hands a safe asylum within her country, in case it should be necessary for him at any time to suddenly flee his own, and offering her equivalent privileges of sanctuary in Russia, if she should quarrel with her own subjects. But the Queen, knowing her popularity with her people, gladly agreed to give this conscience-stricken Tsar asylum, while repudiating a corresponding privilege for herself as entirely unnecessary.

Meanwhile the struggle with Livonia continued, and our Russian troops were once more, for a while, successful, so that the power of the Order was crushed and broken, and the fortresses of the Baltic coast were one by one captured by our armies. In all these fights, I, Alexander Stroganof, took my share, and was sometimes in the favour of the Tsar, and sometimes out of it. But by reason of these other more important occupations, I saw less of Yermak during these years, and was obliged on more than one

occasion to miss my two-yearly appointment with him.

It was while Ivan's armies were absent upon these Livonian wars that a dreadful calamity happened to the nation. The Crimean Khan Devlet Gherei suddenly appeared before Moscow, burned the great city to the ground, and carried away one hundred thousand captives of all classes of the people.

Though, in the following year, our general, Vorotinsky, exacted a terrible vengeance upon this Mussulman and his armies, yet matters from this time onward went all awry for my master. His candidature for the throne of Poland was repudiated with scorn, and the French Duke of Anjou, brother of the King of France, was chosen instead. Our armies began to suffer defeat in the Baltic provinces—everything went wrong with the Tsar : it was as though the curse of an evil destiny were upon him. Above all, of those matters which especially angered the Tsar at this time, my master was unsuccessful also in a different kind of enterprise. The new Russian ambassador to England, Pisemsky, in an interview with the Tsar, happened to mention the fact that at the Court of her English Majesty was one who was known as the twin-sister of the boyarinya Stroganof.

' Wherefore ? ' asked the Tsar, frowning angrily ; for even now, after twenty years and more, he could not bear the mention of my beautiful Vera's name, and in my rare interviews with him I never dared to speak of my domestic affairs.

'Because,' said Pisemsky, 'the English lady and the Stroganof boyarinya are marvellously alike, as everyone who sees them together cannot fail to observe.'

'Is this English princess, then, beautiful?' asked the Tsar, musingly.

'Lovely as the day,' said the other; 'to be like the Stroganova she must be that.'

When the Tsar heard this he lost little time, but sent an ambassador straight to the English Queen, proposing an alliance between himself and her cousin, Mary Hastings.

But Mary Hastings would none of him. In this she was like her 'twin-sister,' my Vera, that she had no ambition to be the Tsaritsa of Russia, but preferred rather to move in a less glorious sphere, so, only, that she might have her share of domestic happiness and the peace of private life.

This so greatly enraged my master, the Tsar, that the whole fabric of commercial relations so happily and laboriously built up between Russia and England was in great danger of collapsing entirely: and the terrible Tsar became more and more terrible to his boyars and his people.

But the indulgence of his own savage spirit could not mend for Ivan the fortunes of his realm, and gradually the Tsar lost his hold upon all his acquired possessions in Livonia. Batory, the successor to the French King of Poland, who did not stay long away from France—Batory, with the aid of Swedes and

Hungarian mercenaries, made so fierce an onslaught upon certain Russian towns that there was danger of the dismemberment of the empire, and a disastrous peace was made, by which Ivan lost all that he had formerly acquired and more also.

It was just at this crisis that one day, as I sat with my ever-honoured and beloved wife and my grown boys at home in Perm, my uncle being by this time a very aged man, though my brothers were still active—as we sat together at supper the door was suddenly and violently pushed open, and in rushed Yermak in a state of alarm and agitation.

He had been hunted, he said, by the Tsar's troops, from the Volga to the Kama and had with difficulty made his way to Perm. He was an outlaw at this time, and in dire disgrace with the angry Tsar, whom he had offended by levying tribute from certain towns which, having paid Yermak, were therefore unable to pay the Tsar also.

'Yermak,' I said, 'come! we will go across the Urals and conquer Siberia for our poor Tsar: who knows! it may be that the time has come to fulfil our prophetic destiny! The Tsar has certainly lost many of his western possessions, it is time that we took the East in our hands, and laid it at his feet!' I spoke jestingly, for the prophecy had been so long delayed, and matters had gone so hard with the Tsar and all that was his, that I had no real hope of the realisation of our old dreams about Siberia.

But Yermak took the matter very seriously indeed.

'Hide me and my men in one of your salt towns for a while,' he said, 'and as the heavens are above us, Sasha, we will go forth together and do this great thing!' I laughed, but gave Yermak the sanctuary he sought; and, hidden safely in our little fortified town of Chernogor on the slope of the Urals, that great captain (for he has proved himself this) collected a force of eight hundred and fifty men, consisting of his own people and ours; and with these troops under our two selves, Ivan Koltso, Nikita Pan, and one or two other leaders, badly armed, badly provisioned, more of a rabble than an army, we crossed the great range, and entered at once upon that series of conquests which ended in a marvellously short space of time in the subjugation of all the tribes between the Kama and the Obi. I use the expression 'short space of time' in its comparative meaning; we were indeed nearly three years in accomplishing the work we had to do, and alas! we lost our great leader Yermak, who was drowned while crossing a swollen river, before he had enjoyed the opportunity of reaping the fruits of his stupendous services, in the forgiveness and gratitude of the Tsar.

As for me, my dear master took me from this moment entirely into his favour. In that new crown of Siberia was forgotten all that had served to sever our friendship and to keep us, for so many sad years, apart one from the other. With the conquest of

Siberia, too, began a new and brighter epoch for the poor harassed Tsar; and the day which saw Ivan Koltso and myself and one or two of our best men bring to the Tsar and lay at his feet, as it were, the keys of a new empire, was the first of many happy, peaceful days, harbingers of the quiet and peaceful end of the stormy life of Ivan Vasilitch.

The only allusion he ever made to my beloved wife after our full reconciliation was on the day of his death, when he said to me, some little while before the fatal fit seized him—

‘In truth, my Stroganof, I think there is only one boyar in my realm towards whom I have frequently if not consistently behaved well, and that is one whom I was the most sorely tempted to treat ill. Dost thou know who this is?’

‘Alexander Stroganof,’ I replied, believing that it was I he meant, though there might be those who thought otherwise as to his treatment of me.

‘It is so, indeed,’ he said; and added, ‘I am old now, Sasha, and thou too; we are grey though we have both been young in our day; but young or old I have never loved a woman save once.’

‘The Tsaritsa Anastasia,’ I said weakly, for I spoke her name without conviction, and only because I durst not say another.

‘As a saint,’ said Ivan, ‘yes; as a woman, no Art thou indeed ignorant, Sasha?’

‘Alas! Tsar Ivan, if this be indeed so, as thou sayest,’ I cried, my eyes full of tears, ‘how was it

I was not struck dead, as thou hast struck not one but many of those who have offended thee ? Why was I spared ?'

'Not for thy own sake, Sasha,' said the Tsar, smiling, 'though now I rejoice that thou wert man enough to escape out of my hand when my passion outran my generosity.'

Nevertheless the Tsar never asked to see Vera again, and it so happened that he suddenly died on this very day, while playing at chess.

And so perished the greatest of all Russians up to the present time ; for both great and terrible was Ivan Grosnui, terrible to all with whom he came in contact ; yet I, personally, in spite of many periods of deep vexation of spirit because of him and his violence, I personally have learned to see in my dear but dread master much that was most lovable and truly noble.

Even Vera, my ever faithful and loving and ever beautiful wife, believes, since I reported to her the Tsar's last conversation with me, that there was more heroism in Ivan Vasilitch than she had thought heretofore.

'He spoke the truth, my soul,' said she ; 'he has treated us well, according to his lights. God give him a heavenly kingdom !'

And to this prayer I say fervently every day of my life, 'Amen !'



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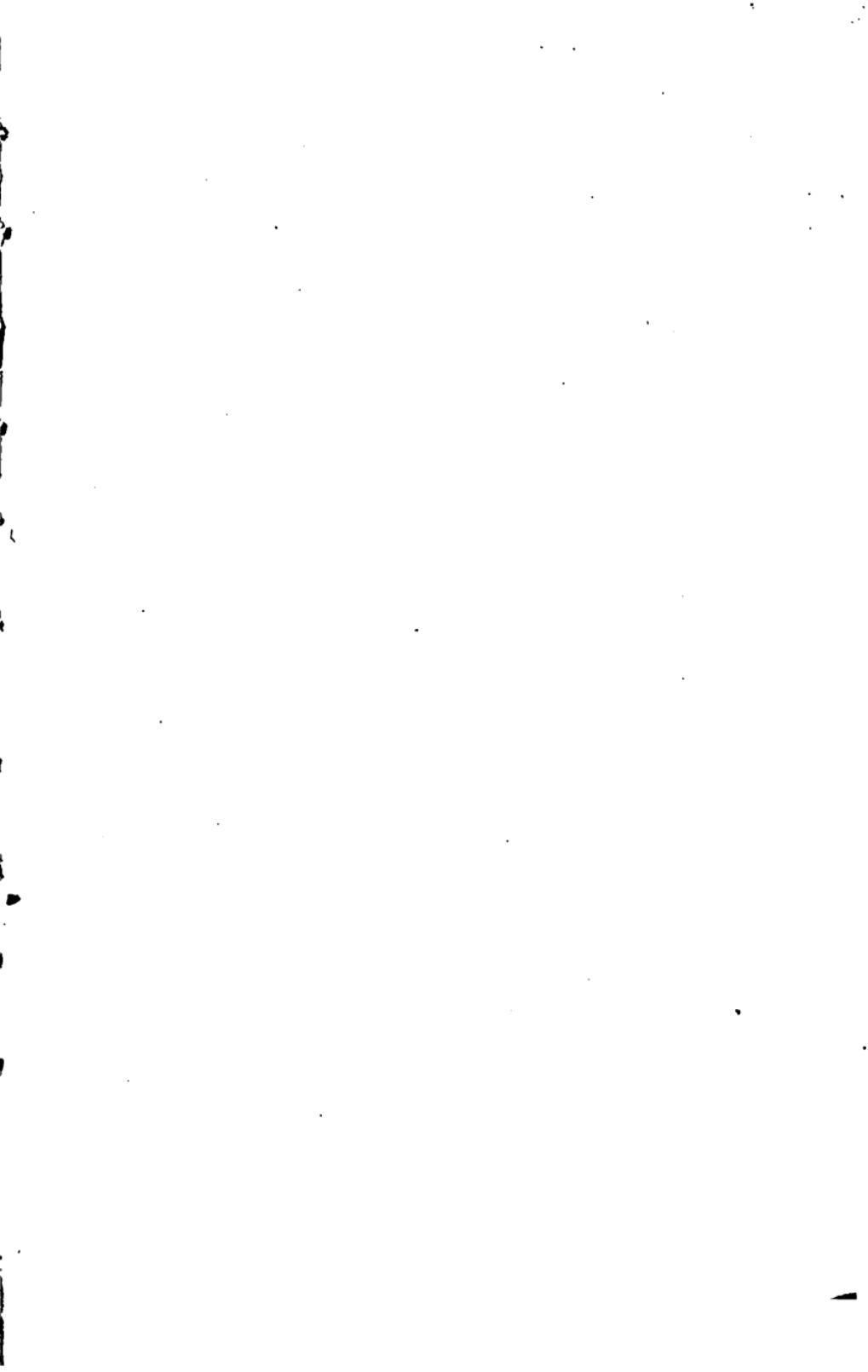
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